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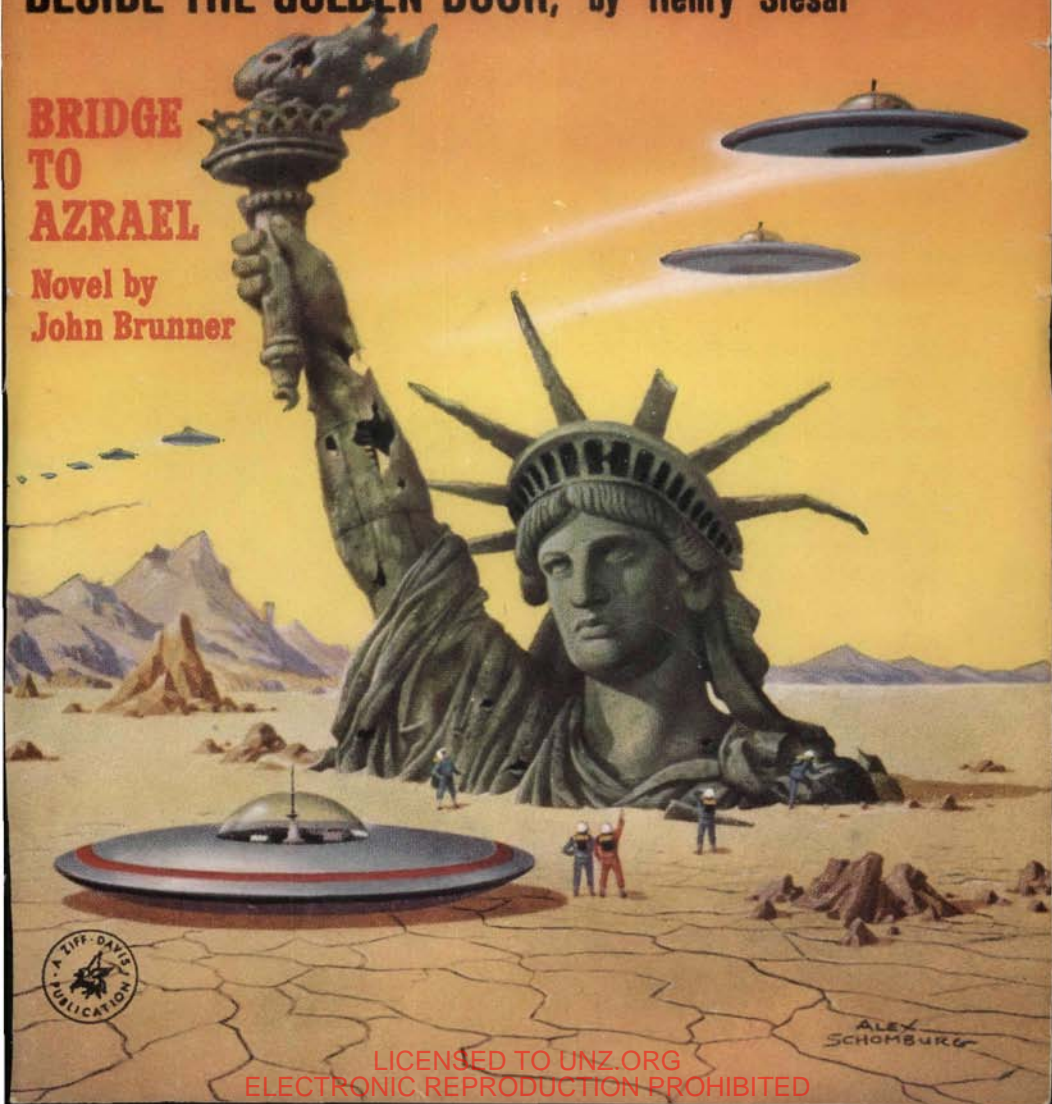
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**BRIDGE
TO
AZRAEL**

**Novel by
John Brunner**



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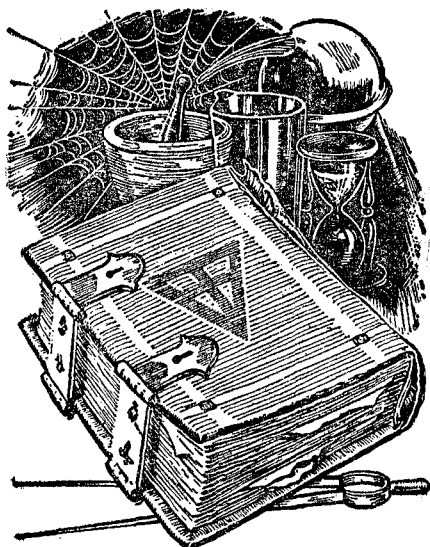
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February, 1964
 Vol. 38, No. 2

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COMPLETE NOVEL

THE BRIDGE TO AZRAEL

By John Brunner 6

SHORT STORIES

BESIDE THE GOLDEN DOOR

By Henry Slesar 80

I BRING FRESH FLOWERS

By Robert F. Young 107

HEAVY, HEAVY

By F. A. Javor 111

SF PROFILE

L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP: Sword and Sorcery

By Sam Moskowitz 97

FEATURES

EDITORIAL 5

COMING NEXT MONTH 106

... OR SO YOU SAY 125

Cover: Alex Schomburg

Illustrating *Beside the Golden Door*

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EDITORIAL

HUGO GERNSBACK, father of science-fiction magazines, blasted off recently in an address before the SF Society of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His target: those who have taken the science out of sf on the ground that reality has caught up with imagination. His ringing affirmation: "Science fiction is still a powerful force that stimulates thinking men whose destiny is tied up strongly in the future."

Here are some excerpts from what Gernsback had to say:

"Science fiction—under *any* term or name—must, in my opinion, deal first and foremost in futures. It must, in story form, forecast *the wonders of man's progress to come*. The genre has now been prostituted to such an extent that it often is quite impossible to find any reference to science in what is popularly called science fiction today.

"This state of affairs has degenerated lately with increasing momentum, chiefly because most authors know little about the incredibly vast future of science, nor have they the imagination to cope with coming events. The au-

thor, nine times out of ten, takes refuge in non-scientific fantasy. It is far easier to compose and probably reads better than a technical-science yarn that often is not easy to digest by the uneducated reader.

"Often an author attempts to disguise his scientific poverty by using pseudo-scientific terminology. Hence the overwhelmingly large percentage of magazine and book editors can no longer buy true science fiction stories as they did in the twenties. There are just not enough science fiction authors today who can deliver adequate material with science-motivated content.

"It also makes me sad when I see the constantly-recurring scribbling of the many prophets of doom who have recently become fashionable in their endeavor to write off genuine science fiction as *passé*. Such bankruptcy of intellect can always be traced directly to the inability of such writers to comprehend the status and message of true prophetic science fiction. This fantastic lack of imagination often is as ludicrous as it is pathetic.

(Continued on page 124)

Once every few years a science fiction story comes along which poses—and probes—philosophical questions: for instance: What is life that Man must live it? In a novel rich in incident, fascinating of character, John Brunner questions the essential meaning of life and death and purpose.

THE BRIDGE

THERE are machines to move, that do move, half a million people a day from world to world as expeditiously as postal packages and with them a million tons of freight like entries in a ledger, balancing, and I am Jorgen Thorkild walking. On two feet. Down a corridor. I could have sent for any of them. Waited for them. Instead, I walk down a corridor between two faceless lines of doors, hearing

at the edge of hearing the noise within. Layered, the building, this part above ground, to look out from the windows over the city and work distracted by the outer sunlight. This layer: RIGER'S WORLD. Earthside representatives. The door named after Koriot Angoss.

Jorgen Thorkild paused with his hand out to the lock of the door. He was Director of the Bridge System. This door, like

TO AZRAEL

By JOHN BRUNNER

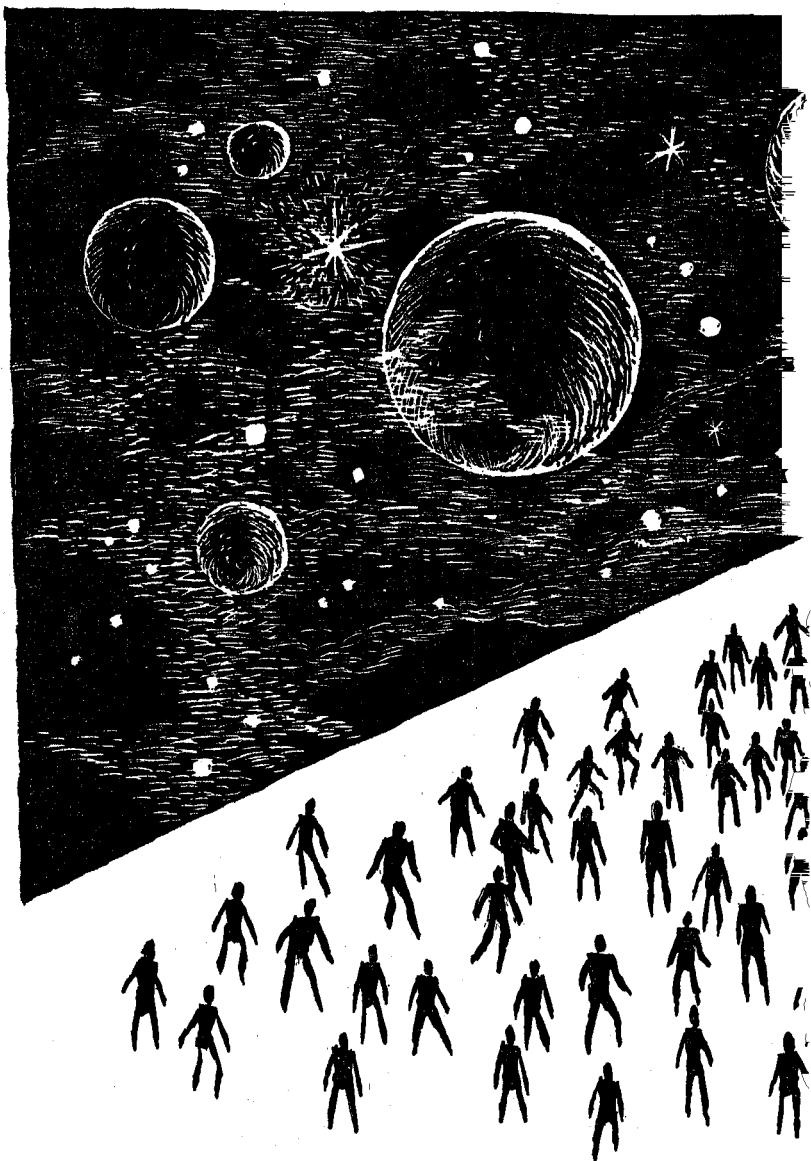
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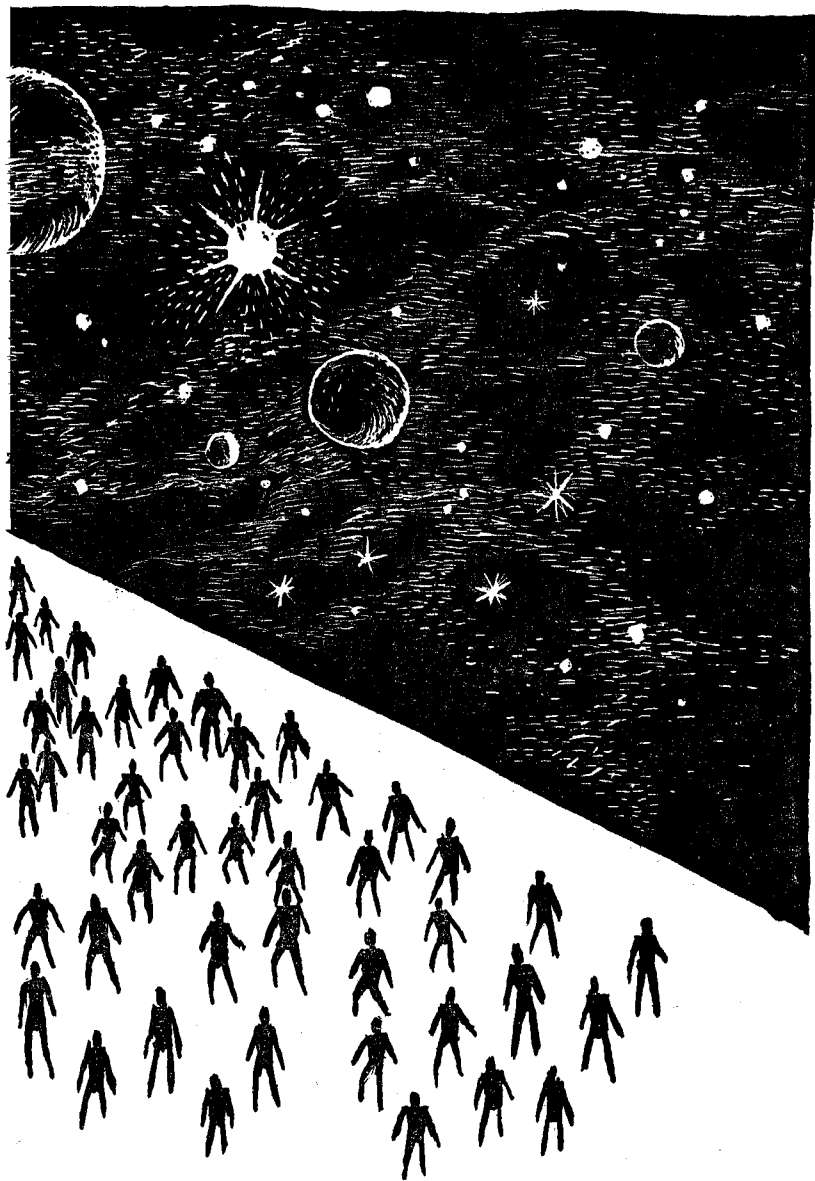
every other door here, would unlock for him if he merely set his hand to it. He listened.

Beyond the door, audible but fined down to a sharp cutting edge, someone singing. The dialect of Riger's World was not too far off that of Standard Earth speakers. The song was bawdy. After a few lines, someone with an instrument—it seemed acoustic, rather than electronic—chorded in an accompaniment,

feeling for the structure of the simple melody. He closed the last inch-gap between his hand and the door, and the lock clicked.

Koriot Angoss not at his desk with its banked electronic equipment, but sitting on a padded stool from his home world, an untidy man with wild hair and a grin that showed a gold front tooth, holding in one hand a mug of some pale brown liquid—a





kind of beer, maybe. And on the long padded bench under the big window of the office, his confidential human secretary, the girl Maida Wenge fingering the instrument Thorkild had heard through the door. It was an air-bellows device, an accordion of sorts. She stopped directly she saw Thorkild.

Angoss walked himself around the stool, sitting, moving his feet sidewise. He raised his mug to Thorkild.

"Good day, Director," he said, changing back from his native dialect in which he had been singing to Standard Earth. His accent showed slightly, but he had been here several years and worn it thin. "Will you take a mug with us?"

Thorkild shook his head, letting the door slide shut. He stood looking down at Angoss. It wasn't right. Was it? It couldn't be right for a man of such responsibility.

He said, unable to yield to the desire to speak of right and wrong, fitting and unfitting, "You're sending us a problem, I understand."

Angoss got to his feet and helped himself to more beer—it smelt like beer—from the jug standing in the middle of his flat desk-top. He said, "We have none on Riger's. Do we?"

"One you seem anxious to be rid of," Thorkild spoke evenly,

but that cost him effort. "The preacher Rungley."

"Him," Angoss said, and sat on his stool again. "His sect is the Coppersnakes, they tell me. You can ignore them. And him."

He waved again at the jug on the desk. "Sure you won't?"

"I haven't time," Thorkild said. "And that isn't an adequate answer."

ANGOSS parodied a look of hurt pride. "Don't you trust me?" he said.

"Why can we ignore him? I don't like the sound of him."

"Director, how many crazy preachers have you had come over the Bridges with the much-publicized intention of converting Earth?" Angoss said with a sigh.

"Many. A few have given trouble."

"Rungley won't be one of the few. Look: the Coppersnakes are an offshoot of a sect which once flourished in Continental North America, result of a bastard crossing between an African fertility cult and Christianity. They handle snakes as proof of faith. They have a built-in check-and-balance mechanism—every so often someone gets bitten, and gets very sick or dies, and half the congregation changes its mind. You slip a few king cobras, kraits and mambas to Rungley. Inside a week he'll be hospital-

ized for the first time, and after that he'll likely go home."

It sounded like a sensible solution. Only—sensible solutions from a man found in working hours (not long hours, not overly demanding work) drinking beer with his secretary and singing a bawdy folksong . . . ?

Thorkild said, "What's their strength on Riger's World?"

"They meet in a hand-carpen-tered wooden hut." Angoss took another pull at his beer. "Since Rungley announced he was coming to Earth, they've built an annex to the church. They get maybe sixty people to a meeting."

"Why in hell don't you keep your archaic survivals to yourself?" Thorkild said. He didn't mean to be so brusque. The girl Maida Wenge looked at him with sombre, dark-pool eyes. She was beautiful by her own world's standards, but for Earthly tastes was too broad-hipped.

"You spliced us into the Bridge System," Angoss said coolly.

Thorkild hesitated a moment. Almost, he demanded to know what the point of that remark was. Then he saw what answer he would get. Abruptly he spun on his heel and went out of the office. Even before the door slid closed, he heard Angoss say, "Loving, again—highing the key for my basest notes have stretched my voice."

THE BRIDGE TO AZRAEL

RIGER'S World, Platt's World, Kayowa, Earthside representatives. Busier on the layers above, for Platt's and Kayowa were taking immigrants currently. He saw it with his mental eye as he went to his own floor, top-most on the building, where he ruled. Young for the fantastically responsible post—when he succeeded Saxena, less than forty. Equipped for it. That counted and nothing else did. Handsome, they told him: just under two full metres tall, his hair blond and shading to red, his eyes piercing blue, his build muscular, but lean because of his great height. Jorgen Thorkild, Director of the Bridge System.

Tired as hell. Why not?

If you were an Earthside representative for a whole buzzing lively world, you rated one or more human secretaries, as Angoss rated Maida.

If you were the Director, you rated a string of them.

If you were an Earthside representative, you had a staff of agents here and at home, obeying your orders, acting in your name.

If you were the Director, you had a staff numbered in thousands, here and—everywhere.

And you still did the work.

He went in through the outer office. He said nothing to the busy men and women there. Only when he took his place at his

desk did he speak to the air, activating the communicator with a coded order, and continuing.

"Anything since I've been out?"

"Responsible van Heemskirk called, and will call back in a few minutes," said a voice from the desk. "Also Alida Marquis called, and wants you to call her. And Inwards Traffic wants a decision on the Rungley case."

Alida . . .

He thought for a moment about Saxena, and wished he had not, and slid open a drawer in his desk. There was a portrait laid flat there. It showed the face of a worried man. He was not handsome. He looked as tired as Thorkild sometimes felt without showing it.

"Sir?" The puzzled voice came again from the desk.

"What was that?"

"The Rungley case. If Inwards Traffic hold him any longer, we'll be infringing the summary right and liable to suit."

"Let him go on his way." Thorkild thought that this was a decision made by an untidy man drinking beer and singing a dirty song, and it was still his decision. It was always his. Whether he fathered it or adopted it.

He thought of it like that because of Alida.

Then he wished he had not thought of Alida.

He said, controlling himself with determination, "But to supplement that—Rungley will want snakes. Supply them from the resources of Game Conservation. Try one of the major zoos if there's no other possibility. Make sure they're poisonous as hell. I want him in hospital within seven days and back on Riger's World inside a month, understood?"

"Yes, Director. Shall I call Alida Marquis?"

Thorkild felt a stab of unaccountable and foolish anger. He knew what he was going to say was self-defeating. He knew it would prejudice his chances—perhaps hopelessly. He said it.

"No. Let her call me back."

"Very good, Director. And—oh Responsible van Heemskirk is calling again. Shall I put him through?"

"And be damned to him." But Thorkild said that to himself. Aloud, he merely agreed.

RESPONSIBLE van Heemskirk appeared in the office. He was probably some miles away, but the solido equipment serving the Bridge Center was the finest possible and the illusion was perfect. He said, "Day, Jorgen."

"Day, Moses." Fat as butter and twice as greasy. Unfair. A career politician, and clever. Perhaps he was genuinely of an

agreeable disposition. Only with politicians, how to know?

"We have these two aspirant worlds," van Heemskirk said. "Ipewell, and Azrael. This afternoon all right?"

"Moses, you know that if there's one thing I hate—"

"It's showing round parties of giggling outworlders. I know." The voice from the illusory image was soothing, and a ripple indicating a sigh moved under the yellow satin blouse and was followed by a shrug. "However, it's the standard procedure, and they must know what the Bridge System is, and they are important on their own worlds, and consequently we must do them the honor of being shown the Bridge Center by its most important man. And—we have this argument every time."

Thorkild had to nod. He said, "All right—when?"

"Fifteen hours. Usual procedure, of course."

"Ipewell and Azrael," Thorkild said. "What are they like?"

"Outworlders," van Heemskirk answered, with some contempt. "But you'll see. Until fifteen, then—and don't be so miserable. This only happens once a year or so."

"True. Moses! Just a moment before you cut out." Thorkild raised his hand as if to stop the intangible image by claspings hold on it.

THE BRIDGE TO AZRAEL

"Yes, what is it Jorgen?"

"How many times have you gone by Bridge?"

"I don't know. But no more often than I could help—except for vacations. Why?"

"I just wondered," Thorkild said.

The plump man looked at him, raising one eyebrow. He said, "And you? Every day?"

"No," Thorkild said. "Like you—when I have to. Until fifteen, then. Goodbye."

He saw the image dissolve. Then he went on looking at the place where it had been.

Half a million people a day, he thought. And I walk. Who are we? What are we?

Should he call Alida?

He opened the drawer again, and looked at Saxena's drawn face, and thought about Alida because he had to.

II

WHEN the sun came out on this city—and he had seen it come out—it looked incongruous. This time of mists, near dawn, and the occasional lift of wind and sift of drizzling rain, with the greyness of it, was more appropriate.

Jacob Chen drew close the concealing cloak about his neck the hood over his head, and walked circumspect through the street. The buildings beside him were

mostly of dark stone, a little glinting for the sheen of wet upon them, which caught and reluctantly gave back the occasional glimmer of the lights.

There were lights in a few windows, too. Not many. It was not yet dawn.

One should not think of climate as forming man, in this age when man could form climate. Here: had they neglected to do so because of economic difficulties, or from some obscure principle? He did not yet know. He ought to know. He felt he had failed in his duty by not knowing. Worse still, he had failed himself as he thought of himself, and doubt of his own capacity was the fearfulest thing he could face.

If they were hiding facts from him . . . ? But he had come out because of that suspicion, and walked the town night-long, and sought with all his senses for the clue which would prove it true, and had nothing.

He sniffed the air. Fresh smoke. Someone lighting a warm fire to face the autumn day. And he could see it, spiralling up from the chimney of a house across the way.

There was a big grey building he could see from where he had come to now—a junction of streets he had not passed before, forming a circus with a blank obelisk in the center. He eyed the

obelisk and his mind crowded automatically with anthropological data: fertility symbols, upstanding to the sky.

No. It made no sense. It was human, but lacked the vigor of the symbol.

He crossed the circus to the front of the grey building and stood listening. There was a chanting from within. Sometimes there was a hiss-and-slap and a shrill cry. Did you put a creation of pure chance in the middle of a junction where a building of such importance faced the street? It seemed that these people did. There was disconnection here—so sharp he could barely admit the evidence of his senses.

He walked up the five shallow stone steps to the door of the grey building. Like many ceremonial structures, it had a huge door, eight metres high at least, occupying the greater part of this end wall facing him, and because the main door was so difficult to open without power hinges, which he could see it did not have, there was another, smaller, door set in it. This one stood ajar. He hesitated, and stepped inside.

ONE dim light swung in the wind inside the door, from a low false ceiling which—together with plain native-wood partitioning—created an anteroom beyond the entrance. No decora-

tion. No symbolism. And yet such a place as this was crucial to their culture.

He had hypothesized. He could be wrong. He knew that. And in a sense knew he could *not*—for to be wrong was to destroy his existence. He slid back the panel-door set in the partitioning and went beyond, into the great hall itself, which occupied most of the highroofed building.

Here there was no furnishing except plain wooden benches, and again no decoration. The windows were tall slits with many small pieces of clear white glass set in metal frames. The floor was of stone flags. About fifty or sixty people were here, some sitting on the benches, some few lying on the floor unconscious. At the center of the group—the benches being disposed on three sides of a square at the geometric center of the hall—four men and two women wearing only coarse kilts were scourging each other with the things that made the hiss-and-slap: broad-lashed whips, short-handled, long-thonged.

That was all.

Nobody at all turned to look at him. The people sitting on the benches mostly had their eyes closed; they had drawn up cloaks similar to the one he was wearing, covering the marks on their backs and hiding their heads in the hoods.

How do you build a society on this?

Jacob Chen looked, and shuddered, and went out again into the cold unwelcoming street.

Wrong, the stream of his thought cast up. A word like a corpse, oozing from its mouth the water of a putrid river, stinking of decayed hopes.

Wrong. Not a word to which he could any longer attach a meaning. A programmer couldn't be wrong. A programmer had insufficient data.

He stopped in his tracks, turned, a great pounding in his chest as though his heart had suddenly grown to twice its size and iron hardness, clanging at every beat. His belly was stretched tight with apprehension. He went back up the five steps towards the little door in the big door.

THEY came out from the city a few hours after dawn, four men in sweeping black robes, shiny, as if oiled, with fringed fur hats on their heads. They rode like mutes on the way to a funeral in a high-sided car powered by a humming electric motor. When they crossed the boundary of the spaceport they slowed the car so that a group of forewarned members of the port staff could fall in respectfully behind, walking stately in the rain.

Captain Lucy Inkoos came down the ramp from the ferry-ship. They had informed her about this, with regret that seemed genuine. And it wasn't for her to judge.

She stood uncovered in the rain, and drops spotted and then flowed together on the red fabric of her uniform. Her ancestors had made the Benin bronzes; her face, fine-carved, high-cheeked, was impassive as a bronze image as she waited for the approach of the cortège. Four of her officers stood with her beside the ramp.

The high-sided car halted. Stiffly, like awkward but silent machines, the four men in black shiny robes got to the ground. One of them walked forward to face Captain Inkoos.

He was at least her equal in height, and the high-crowned fur hat added twenty centimetres to that, so as to give the effect of immense stature. He was not looking down at her, but she seemed to hear his voice from far overhead.

He said, "We brought him back."

Captain Inkoos nodded. "I was told," she said. Around her the four officers shifted from foot to foot.

"We regret this," the man said. "As I have had the story, he asked to join one of our rituals. In the hall near the circus of the

obelisk. By chance a participant decided to take action the very moment he joined the group. And—he is as you see."

The other three, with help from some of the port staff who had walked across the landing-ground in the rain, had opened the back of the car and were now lifting the body of Jacob Chen to the ground. They had wrapped him in a piece of black satin, but when the light fell full it showed a patch of reddish stain over where the corpse's heart must be.

"The man who killed him"—Captain Inkoos heard the voice seem now to come not merely from a great distance in space, but also from a point far away in time—"will of course be dealt with. Would you wish to send a representative to the execution when it takes place?"

Captain Inkoos repressed a shudder. She said, "No." And, realizing how thick and discourteous her voice must have sounded, went on, "We accept that Jacob Chen had no business to intrude on your ritual. He left the ship by himself, telling no one where he was going. He brought it on himself."

"His wishing to join the ritual," the man said. "We have no objection, you understand. It is public. Only—we do not think he knew the reason for joining. And he did not find out."

Captain Inkoos felt her broad

flat lips press together, narrowing, as she studied the face of the man with the fur hat. The fringe which fell all around it concealed his forehead, but the rain had gathered some of the hairs together into stringy bunches, and she could guess at the location of his hairline. A high forehead, a sensitive mouth, those hollow-intellectual's—cheeks . . .

And they built on this death.

It was not her business to understand. She could only curse Jacob Chen for wasting himself, and nod, and thank the men in black shiny robes for bringing back the body, and ask for a transcript of the trial if there was to be one.

"There will not be a trial," the man said. "It was in the course of ritual, in plain sight. When one does that, he is deliberate. It is to restore reality to existence by invoking death. There is nothing else."

THAT wall they had battered for months, since first contact. Captain Inkoos wondered if Jacob Chen had breached it in the last moments, before his life flooded from the knife-hole in his chest. The four officers moved from behind her and took the stiffening corpse, black-wrapped, from its bearers to carry it into the ship. One of them put his hand incautiously down as he

moved into position; when he took it away, the palm was marked with rusty blood.

These are people, she said to herself. They had ancestors in common with me. All human beings are at least cousins. All human beings can understand one another. This world when found was assumed to be like—although unlike—others. There was this spaceport, with many ferry-ships which travelled to the local asteroids, mining and refining, and to a scientific observatory on the major satellite, and there was a good living-standard though drab compared with most other worlds'. They spoke a language close to Standard Earth, considering the long gap since previous contact with other human worlds.

And she had had to send for Jacob Chen, because he was a programmer and there was this wall of non-comprehension.

She glanced up the ramp. The body was going out of sight, awkwardly man-handled by the four officers. There would be an inquiry. There would be no blame. You didn't order a programmer to account for his movements. You sent for him because he knew what to do better than anyone else could.

And died. Through not understanding. Perhaps it would be generations before the problem was solved, if he had failed.

The black-robed men, and the port staff, stood silent, and only the sound of the rain and the shifting of feet on the metal ramp could be heard.

No one would put blame on her, Captain Inkoos thought. But were you to blame Jacob Chen himself, a man who could punch a program of a million words into a computer? A man whose mind grasped problems beyond the conception of ordinary folk? Were you to blame these men in black robes and fur hats?

Or whom?

The port staff began to walk back to the administration buildings, low-crouched at the edge of the landing-ground. The man she had been talking to said, "We regret it, you understand."

"I believe you."

"We regret existence," the man said. He glanced at his companions and they nodded, and all four of them turned together to get back into the high-sided car.

Captain Inkoos thought of them as they might perhaps be—today, or tomorrow—stripped to the waist, offering themselves to pain. Pain is the only reality, they said. Pleasure can be negated; even boredom, the neutral, featureless state, makes pleasure impossible. But the happiest man can be hurled to the depths of misery by the stab of a rotting tooth, or the lash of a whip on his back. Unite reality

to consciousness, they said, by pain. And if that too fails, a man may invoke the last reality of all by taking such action as to cause his death. Here, as on most worlds more backward than Earth, they killed a man for killing a man. Kill in the sight of witnesses, and in your turn be killed.

And the man you kill may by chance be Jacob Chen, unique, genius, programmer.

She grew aware that her senior aide, Commander Kwan, had come down the ramp to stand beside her and watch the scattered components of the brief cortège disperse.

After some time in silence, the commander said, "What are we to make of them?"

Captain Inkoos shrugged and didn't answer. Jacob Chen had not been able to; how could she?

"Will we ever be able to get on with them?" Kwan persisted.

"Ask the future," Captain Inkoos said shortly, and turned and walked up the metal ramp, the hard heels of her shoes making a sharp noise at every step.

III

LIKE most worlds with characteristics fitting them for human occupation, Ipewell had one large satellite and a G-type primary. But Ipewell had no moon, and no sun.

They were Mother's Night Eye and Mother's Day Eye.

Formerly he had had no chance of being allowed out on his own unless one of Mother's Eyes was open. But by behaving so well lately that his family had almost become suspicious, Lork (Garria-third-boy) had contrived to stretch and stretch the periods when he could be out of sight without people asking where he had got to.

This evening: the big risk, the staking of all.

There was a gap of four whole hours today between the disappearance of the Day Eye into the red clouds of sunset and the opening of the Night Eye among the stars. Consumed half by terror and half by astonishment at his own bravery, he slipped away across the great yard of the family homestead towards the secret path among the bushes lining the river. The path had once been a creekcat run, but no one had seen a creekcat here in living memory.

Cautiously at first, then with increasing speed as he drew further away from home and the risk of being heard, he made his way around two bends of the river. He came finally to a place where a blaze had been cut in the thick spongy stem of a brella-bush, and paused.

"Jeekin?" he whispered. "You there?"

Jeekin (Fabia-eighth-boy) rose from shadow, sighing with relief. "I thought for certain you'd been turned back," he said. "I haven't been waiting long, but it felt like an eternity. I expected the Night Eye to open any moment."

"Custom forbid!" Lork snapped. He spat on the ground and stamped three times on the little wet blob. "But we'll have to hurry anyway. Let's go."

Jeekin nodded and parted the bushes carefully. They crept between the heavy drooping leaves and emerged on the edge of the rolling grassy meadows that ran unbroken to the skyline. A long way ahead of them was a reddish glow marking their goal.

They began to run.

Ten minutes later they were too close to the red glow to go on running unnoticed. Jeekin pointed at a clump of maxage and Lork, grunting agreement, dived for its shelter. Together they panted to recover their breath.

"See the ship?" Jeekin said softly.

"Big," Lork said. "How many people aboard?"

"I've heard it's a thousand, but I don't believe it. You *could not*."

Lork wasn't so sure, but he didn't answer. He lay and feasted his eyes. Dull-gleaming in the last of the twilight, the ship rested in a shallow dip on top of

a rising mound, perfectly spherical except for the vertical spike pointing starwards above the hull. The reddish glow came from emergency lights at the foot of the mound, where the crew had set up a temporary village of prefabricated huts.

"What do we do now?" Lork whispered.

"Someone's coming this way," Jeekin muttered. "See?"

STRAINING his eyes, Lork made out two figures moving shadowy on the meadowland. For a horrifying moment they seemed to be heading straight for the maxage where he and Jeekin lay hidden; then they turned aside randomly, and he saw that they were simply strolling about. There was a sound of laughter, and a low woman's voice tinged with amusement said something.

Of course, it would have to be women they met first on this dangerous expedition. Imagine a woman hearing them with sympathy—even the *different* kind of woman rumor reported as being aboard the starship.

Correction: not two women, but a woman and a man. The man's gruff tones carried less well than his companion's.

"I think they're heading for us," Jeekin said unsteadily.

"Lie still till they're past, then," Lork hissed.

Excellent idea. Except that they weren't going past. When they came close to the clump of maxage they looked around to make certain they were out of sight of their companions nearer the ship. Then the man unrolled something mattress-like on the ground. The woman helped him straighten it. Lork's scalp began to prickle. Not . . .

But he could see clearly that the woman wasn't pregnant. By Ipewell standards she was skinny, while the man was a fine specimen such as any Mother would have trouble keeping to herself; still, perhaps there were compulsory arrangements about fatherhood. Lork understood vaguely that the way of life the star-people followed differed from his own, but he had no experience to help him conceive how.

The man turned to the woman and put out his arms. They embraced.

"Oh no!" Jackin exploded, and leapt to his feet.

The man and woman sprang apart, snatching at their waists. Two powerful lights—seeming to the terrified Lork at least as bright as the Day Eye—transfixed him and Jeekin. Miserably he too stood up.

After a pause, the man spoke in Ipewell dialect. He said, "So—a couple of peeping toms."

"No—uh—no!" Lork babbled,

and realized for the first time that there wasn't a respectful form of address for male superiors in Ipewell language. Men were by definition inferior, not able to reproduce. Yet it was wrong to speak to a man from the stars as an equal. "We just wanted to—uh—"

How to hammer into words what had driven them to defy the personal order of Mother Uskia, forbidding all males to go near the starship?

The woman said, "Who are you, anyway?"

Shaking, they gave their names.

"Jeckin (Fabia-eighth-boy)?" the woman repeated. "I've heard of your family. Life must be hell for you, isn't it?"

That wasn't a remark to expect from a woman. Jeckin was startled. Lork gave him an encouraging nod, and he suddenly burst out, "Yes! Yes! For my mother-in-fact has eleven children which should bring her great honor but we are all male, all of us, and she is past bearing now and the shame of having no daughters stains the family!"

Lork squeezed his friend's arm. He had often heard how hellish Fabia made life for her children because of their inferior sex.

The man and woman looked at each other, shrugging. The man said, "Well, now you're here, sit

down and explain what you came for."

GAY LOGAN listened to the two boys. You could hardly make out their features in the dimness, but she could tell they were nice-looking—dark-haired, probably rather dark-skinned like most of Ipewell's people, and about the same age: fifteen or sixteen. And intelligent. And frustrated.

Then her attention wandered from what they were saying and she looked at Hans Demetrios. He sat cross-legged, head cocked to one side, absolutely taut with concentration. A stab went through her.

This was where his interest lay, really. Not in her. Not in anyone, not even himself.

Half-jokingly they said there was a new breed evolving and Hans Demetrios belonged to it, and Jacob Chen, and a handful of others: as though a racial subconscious were reacting over generations to pressure created in environment by man himself. A hungry breed. You could see it. Hans Demetrios did not look in the least like Jacob Chen, and yet you could see the thing in common in their starving-bright eyes, their tense cheek-muscles.

Programmers. Hans was young, and he would go far; already he was out of reach of Gay Logan.

She had tried. She knew the tools with which men tackled the complex universe—she understood the superimbecility of computers, what they could do, what not. She had to use them in her work. With terrible exhausting concentration and provided she was not disturbed even by the drift of a dust-mote across her vision, she could program a computer directly—to the extent of a few hundred words. They said Jacob Chen could write a program of a million words or more without an error, taking a month over it, and never set a symbol down on paper. All in the head. All at once.

And Hans . . . She had seen him today finish the program for the Ipewell Bridge; he had taken a fortnight over it, ten hours a day, pausing for meals and sleep, and never making a mistake.

You could go and watch him, hands moving on the input keyboard, and he would look up when he had adjusted to the need to be distracted, and nod and smile, and keep right on.

He sees a different universe, she thought. Not the same universe I see.

She felt a dull sense of resignation. He was a nice person—but she'd been so stupid.

"I'll explain," Hans was saying in friendly tones to the two boys. "This world is one of many

which people from Earth came to centuries ago, to colonize and tame it. A planet is big, and human beings are small. You need a lot of them to conquer a new world. Usually the colonists bring with them enough equipment—sometimes including sperm and ova banks and artificial wombs—to tide them over the difficulties of the first generation.

"As we've pieced it together, a terrible disaster—perhaps an earthquake, or a very violent storm—destroyed most of the colonists' supplies. Your ancestors desperately needed manpower at all costs. They had to breed rapidly. So female fertility became a fetish, and fertile women assumed the dominant position in the evolving society here. That's all. The legends of the Greatest Mother, with her Night Eye and her Day Eye, and the rest—they're just legends, invented to bolster the matriarchy and insure its survival."

The boys winced simultaneously. But of course both the Eyes were closed at the moment, so the blasphemy went unpunished.

"Right now," pursued Hans, "Mother Uskia is on Earth, negotiating the splicing-in of Ipewell to the Bridge System. By means of the Bridges matter—including living people—can be transported from world to world.

Since they were invented almost a century ago we of Earth have made it our great task to reunite scattered humanity on all the planets to which it may have wandered. This is not something other worlds must pay for. It's our service to the human race, our greatest ambition. Anyone can go by Bridge to anywhere he wants, provided he carries no sickness and no dangerous goods. That's our one condition—that *anyone* can use the Bridges."

"If you build a Bridge here," Lork ventured, "could—we use it?"

"If by the laws of this planet you're of the age of discretion, yes."

She heard the two boys sigh as one. Her own sigh was not heard except by herself.

When they headed for home, hurrying because it would soon be time for the Night Eye to open, they went in stunned silence. They felt like slaves suddenly shown the promise of liberty.

"Do you believe it?" Jeckin said when they reached the path along the river where they had to separate.

"I want to," Lork answered soberly.

"So do I . . ."

For a while they listened to the splash of the river, staring at each other.

"Lork," Jeckin said awkwardly. "Lork, if it does happen, and they make this—this Bridge he talked about, and we can go to other worlds from here . . . shall we go?"

"Mother Uskia herself and all her attendants couldn't stop me," Lork said.

Jeckin glanced up between the close leaves of the brellabush to where the Night Eye was rising in the sky. He said, "She's watching."

"Let her," Lork answered. "I think she's going to have to watch a lot of things more abominable than what we're doing."

Jeckin chuckled throatily. He clapped his friend on the arm and slid without a sound into the night. Lork turned away likewise. On the way home he began to sing.

IV

GODLIKE two hundred feet overhead, Jorgen Thorkild looked down on the people milling across the transit floor like insects, like signals in the circuits of a computer, like anything but human beings. From such a height they had no names or personal identity; featureless as molecules and almost as numerous, they were piped and channelled and directed on a purely statistical basis.

If I had a thunderbolt to hurl

from this Olympian viewpoint, I wouldn't kill people. I'd just alter some entries in the memory banks.

What the hell happens to human importance down there?

Behind him the door leading on to the vantage platform hushed open. He turned, composing his face to greet the honored delegates. At their head, Moses van Heemskirk—who would never miss such an opportunity. He couldn't have been prouder of the Bridge System if he'd invented the principle himself. By this time, perhaps, he thought he had.

The vantage platform, and the impervious bubble enclosing it, had a refractive index equal to that of air. Most of the gang of delegates hung back even when van Heemskirk marched forward, hand outstretched towards Thorkild. The two who did not were probably the leaders. There were about sixty altogether; you could see how they were stratified, from leaders through aides down to clerks and attendants.

"Day, Jorgen!" van Heemskirk was saying. "Let me present to you the honored delegates of the latest worlds to aspire to membership of our stellar community—Mother Uskia, of Ipewell, and Lancaster Long of the planet Azrael!"

He turned. "Friends, this is Director Jorgen Thorkild, whose

untiring work in the service of the Bridge System puts everyone on forty planets in his debt!"

Usually Thorkild turned van Heemskirk's fulsome flattery with some self-deprecating remark. Today he couldn't summon the energy. He merely shrugged, drawing a frown from van Heemskirk. He knew what that was due to; the same reason that had made van Heemskirk present the delegates to him, not the other way round, although their relative status on their home worlds was probably far superior to Thorkild's on Earth. In van Heemskirk's eyes, Earth's prestige was what mattered. He was never tired of reminding people that Earth got there first.

Got where? To what purpose?

Cautious, the rank and file of the delegations was coming forward across the vantage platform. Thorkild ignored them. He looked over the leaders.

Mother Uskia, from Ipewell: a flat-faced, dark woman in a tight white shirt and tighter white trousers stretched across a bulging melon-belly. Pregnant, and proud of it. On Ipewell it had something to do with social status—hence the honorific Mother before her name. Leading out of the opening down the front of her shirt, between fat mounds of breast, was a thin flex connected to a microphone. A recorder, Thorkild assumed, to provide her

with a permanent record of her trip to Earth.

And Lancaster Long: immensely tall, a hand's breadth more than Thorkild himself, wearing a splendid purple robe and a cylindrical hat of white fur. His complexion was rather sallow. His high-arched nose and sharp dark eyes lent him the looks of a bird of prey.

The ooing and aing could be left to underlings. Mother Uskia and Lancaster Long moved to the edge of the platform and looked down thoughtfully. After a pause, Long said, "How much bigger is this place than the station on Mars that we were brought to?"

"In terms of handling capacity? Sixty or eighty thousand times," Thorkild answered.

THERE was a silence. Shortly van Heemskirk began to fidget. He did not easily endure inactivity. "Uh—Jorgen!" he suggested. "Tell our friends about the System. Whatever you think interesting."

What would they not already know? What could van Heemskirk imagine they did not know? Like a parrot, Thorkild started to recite worn facts.

"The station on Mars is used only for people like yourself who have to undergo quarantine and prepare psychologically for a first visit to Earth. Here we have

Bridges direct to over forty inhabited worlds. This is the Bridge Center for the entire planet, but wherever the population density and traffic warrant it we have subsidiary Bridge Stations, one for every hundred million people or so, connected only to the Center handling off-planet traffic. We build big. We expect our equipment to remain adequate for at least another hundred years."

He broke off, acutely aware of Mother Uskia's microphone pointed at him, and of her intense, suspicious expression. Whatever you think interesting—that was what van Heemskirk had told him to talk about. And suddenly his mind was dry as a desert. What could be interesting about processing human beings—facelsss, average, present or absent merely as statistical variations?

Did Long and Mother Uskia find this interesting? Long had an expression which defied analysis. Perhaps it was boredom. The only point of bringing these gangs of delegates here at all was so that they could see the Bridge Center in operation; they would have had the salient facts given to them within a short while of being contacted, long before they were brought to the Solar System.

He was staring at Long. Why? Tall, yes; beak-nosed, yes; very

distinguished in his purple robe, yes. But for none of these reasons in particular. He—had an air of presence. That was it. As though he were *more here* than Jorgen Thorkild or Moses van Heemskirk or Mother Uskia; certainly *more here* than any of the flowing molecule-people on the transit floor so far below.

Long raised unblinking eyes from the study of the distant human traffic and met Thorkild's gaze directly.

Beginning to be alarmed, van Heemskirk rushed in. "Jorgen! Suppose you tell us about the people we can see down there at the moment—who they are, where they're going?"

Yes, of course he might do that. It hadn't occurred to him. It hadn't occurred to him to look away after meeting Long's eyes, either. When he did so, he felt an unreal *click*—not a click, that was wrong, but something . . . He hunted in memory for what it reminded him of, and then got it. The sense of reluctant yielding, like the soundless snap when you draw apart the north pole of one magnet from the south pole of another.

It cost him effort to focus his eyes on the far-distant floor. He reminded himself that he knew the schedules for at least a week in advance, and he ought to be able to identify at least the large groups . . .

A straggling line of a hundred-odd men and women gorgeous in uniform scarlet caught his eye. With relief, he knew he had something he could say. "That's the crew of the scoutship *Alpheratz*, he said. "The relief crew, that is, going on duty. These ships spend their time tracking down the waves of pre-Bridge colonization, locating worlds where people settled—"

IT struck him violently that both these delegates were from worlds which scoutships had recently discovered. And the entire purpose of their visit was to tie in to the Bridge System.

He finished lamely, "Like yours, for example. I mean—"

Badly worried by now at Thorkild's peculiar incoherence, van Heemskirk hurried to try and cover for him. "It's the most remarkable achievement of mankind!" he declaimed in his public orator's voice. "The invisible links reach out from here to unite planet to planet as the strong bonds of affection unites a family. Yes, precisely, for mankind is one family, after all. Like bonds of affection between relatives!"

Promptly as he began to speak, Mother Uskia turned, pointing her microphone to catch his words.

Long, with much more discernment, ignored van Heem-



skirk's orotundity. He went on looking at Thorkild.

"It must be a highly complicated and demanding job that you hold, Director Thorkild," he said.

"It is!" van Heemskirk has-

tened to agree. "One of the most responsible in the galaxy."

Long did not even turn his head to acknowledge the interruption; van Heemskirk took note of the snub, and flushed. A faint stir of amusement colored

Thorkild's grey thoughts. If Long could freeze out van Heemskirk like that, he would be a man worth knowing.

Remembering belatedly that he ought to make some answer for himself, he nodded.

"And are you satisfied?" Long pursued.

"Satisfied?" Thorkild turned the word round in his mind. "Not yet. Not until all the worlds that man has reached have been tied in to the Bridge System, I guess. And probably not even then."

"You miss my point," Long said. "I realize that you won't rest content until the System has expanded to its ultimate possible limits. But what I meant was rather to ask you if your work satisfies you, or whether it's satisfying—maybe that's clearer."

What might satisfaction mean? Whatever it was, Thorkild thought, he didn't have it. Not any more. Pipe people from here to there, shove freight around, take decisions from a beer-drinker singing an obscene song and have to acknowledge it for your own, like a man standing father to a chance-got child—and being turned down as in some ungraspable way inferior to Saxena, that was the worst of it. Had Saxena suffered this? Was this why he (for another reason than Alida, obviously) had killed himself?

He said, "The work's there. I can do it, I do do it—so far as that goes, I guess it's satisfying."

"As I understand it," Long said, the corners of his mouth turning downwards as if through disappointment, "this Bridge System is now the work of Earth—Earth's reason for living. The service your planet provides for mankind is the way it was described to me."

Thorkild nodded again, wondering what was coming next.

"Tell me," Long said, looking not at Thorkild now but past him, eyes focused on a point in air, "would you agree the comparison made by Responsible van Heemskirk?"

Mother Uskia lifted her microphone as usual to catch Thorkild's reply. Perhaps it was the sudden irritating gesture which made him rap out words before he thought.

"It's more like an octopus, or the web of a spider," he said. "If you really want to know. Or less purposeful than that. Like the stems of a climbing plant feeling around for something to grab hold of and sink suckers into, without the blindest hint of what it's doing it *for*."

"Jorgen!" said van Heemskirk, appalled, and started forward. He was checked by Mother Uskia.

"One moment," she said. "Di-

rector Thorkild, kindly explain what the things are which you compared the Bridge System to: an octopus and a spider's web. On Ipewell we have neither."

"If you don't know what they are, how did you memorize the names on one hearing?" Thorkild demanded. "You pronounce the words perfectly."

A scowl crossed Uskia's flat face. "I know!" she snapped. "But my daughter must know too."

She zipped open the shirt stretched tight on her belly, and Thorkild saw—that the flex from the microphone ran, taped to the skin, down to a button-size speaker plugged into her navel, turned inward to address the growing foetus.

Thorkild tried to stop a grin. The muscles strained in his cheeks. He waved at the thousands of people beneath his feet. "See the greyish crowd?" he said. "They're emigrants bound for Platt's World and Kayowa. Eight thousand a day and—" No good. The idea of the speaker plugged in her navel! You can't start educating them too young! *Wowph!*

And the hooting hysterical laughter began and seemed it would never stop. He managed to force his eyes open three times in succession—once: van Heemskirk looking fit to burst with horror and anger; twice: Uskia,

her face contorted with reaction to the insult he had offered her; thrice: Lancaster Long, looking like the dark angel after whom his planet had been named.

Then the laughter filled his eyes with tears and blinded him.

V

PLANNING committee in session—you don't move a finger without a plan. You daren't. You're a juggler.

Alida Marquis pushed back her dark hair. The four men in the room, seated around the long table, looked at the gesture with a certain hunger; they saw the way the lift of her arm raised her full bosom, drew up the hem of her loose-hanging tan shirt, hand-blocked with ancient black designs, and let be seen an inch of bare skin around her waist. She was very beautiful—statuesquely built, perfectly proportioned, graceful in walking.

Thorkild hadn't called back. That worried her. It was the first time, and somehow disconcerting.

She said, "Come down to the beach sometime and see the rest of it. I swim like anybody else."

Three of the men chuckled self-consciously. The fourth—Metchel: Ways and Means Department—showed his too-large front teeth in a rabbit smile and said, "I'm not greedy, thank you, Alida."

The others chuckled again, with a more genuine amusement. Then, when they saw she wasn't smiling, they turned their minds back to the business before them.

"There won't be any problem of re-allotment of space in the Bridge Center," Metchel said. "Kayowa is due to fill its current emigration program within four months; traffic to Ipewell won't be heavy for a good while yet. And this other place—Azrael—aren't we still waiting for Chen's report?"

Alida nodded. She stared down at the three-dimensional model of the Bridge City which was projected within the transparent depths of the table. Nearest her was the part that most concerned her as Supervisor of Relations: the strip of land and buildings running from the edge of the sea to the foot of the inland hills where forty worlds could meet face to face. Idly she ticked some off in her mind. That block of apartments was a piece of Platt's World; in the basement bar you could eat crisp sticks of peppertree and wash away the tingling after-taste with minty cordials, while a girl played wild skirling music on a uilleann pipe and sang like a gale through treetops. And the wide-spaced houses there—Glory, where tonight they would dance on the grass and the men would toss prickaburrs at the girls'

clothing, and the girls who did not want to be caught and partnered would remember that the burrs would not stick on skin. Glory was sometimes fun.

Why hadn't Thorkild called back?

Someone was saying, "Chen's report? I heard, but I wasn't sure. They must have run into trouble if they sent for him."

She looked up. It was Laverne who had spoken—the psychologist in charge of *mores* adjustment, a too-clever man who could have made a lion lie down with a lamb, they said. And had not yet done so only because he had never been asked to.

Alida said, "Yes. The captain of the scoutship asked for him to be sent out. Her regular programmer couldn't handle the culture analysis; he did the Bridge program, but handed over the rest of the work to Chen."

"Well, in that case," Metchel said, "can't we assume that we ought to go ahead? Knowing Jacob Chen, we'll probably have his results before we're ready even if we start now."

ALIDA shrugged. Somehow the work in hand seemed misty and hard to grasp. It had never been this way before. It was good, demanding, rewarding work. She, and this staff around the table with her, and for each of them a thousand more experts

armed with every conceivable tool for the job, were the people who made the smooth running of the Bridge System possible. Without event, without trouble, without unforeseen snags.

She looked down again into the table, at the model there. People of forty worlds in one city on Earth, their mores and traditions all different, their manners different, their dialects different. Should she go to Glory this evening? You could have fun at Glory. It might take the load off this unhappy mind—

She slapped the table, open-palmed.

"No, don't proceed with Azrael's arrangements," she said. "Jacob Chen is a genius, but if they had to send him out there that means they found something difficult even for him. We'll just make the contingent arrangements for Ipewell, and before we meet again tomorrow I'll have a word privately with van Heemskirk and find out more details. Anything else?"

Laverne looked up. He said, "Yes. A preacher from Riger's—name of Rungley. Do you know about him?"

"The snake-worshipper," Alida said. "What about him?"

"They let him through this morning on Thorkild's instructions. I've had a word with Koriot Angoss about him, and it's all very well for Angoss to have

assured Thorkild the man was safe to be let loose, but whereas on Riger's he's merely a fanatical member of an obscure sect, he's a novelty here, and—a problem."

"In what way?"

"He's immune to snake-venom. Angoss's idea was that he should be given some deadly snakes, so that he'd get pretty sick and be made to look foolish. Only—they sent through the results of his routine quarantine examination, and it turns out he has the enzyme S-hematinase. A black mamba could spit in his eyes and he wouldn't turn a hair. But other people who don't have the enzyme would require intensive chemotherapy—and at that they might be unlucky."

Alida passed her hand across her forehead. She said, "How does he come by this enzyme?"

"It's been selected for among his ancestors—on a chance basis for who knows how many generations, and since emigration to Riger's deliberately. He has it from both sides of his family."

"Watch him," Alida said. She tried to think of something to add, and couldn't. After a moment, Laverne shrugged and began to gather his documents into his portfolio. The others got to their feet and did the same.

Into the sound of shuffling feet and rustling papers came the click of the solido projector turning on, and they automatically

raised their eyes to see Responsible van Heemskirk's image floating in mid-air at the end of the room. His eyes sought Alida. He wore an ill-tempered expression and there were patches of sweat darkening his yellow shirt.

He said, "Have you been discussing Azrael?"

Alida looked at him. She had never seen him like this before. He was never disturbed by anything.

An extraordinary sense of unreasoning excitement gripped her. She felt the pulses in her throat begin to beat like hammers.

"Yes, we have," she said. "Not in detail, but—"

"All right. Get round to my office at once—and you, Laverne: you'd better come too. You know Jacob Chen was sent out to Azrael in response to an urgent request from the scoutship captain there. Well, he got mixed up in some local ritual. And they killed him."

The eyes of all five in the room snapped tight on van Heemskirk's round face, glistening with perspiration.

"What's more," van Heemskirk said in a rough-edged voice, "we just had to put Jorgen Thorkild under sedation. He's had a breakdown and insulted the representative from Ipewell, and the System feels as though it's grinding to a halt."

THERE was a tall woman in scarlet uniform in van Heemskirk's office, her face as still and noble as an ebony carving; van Heemskirk presented her as Captain Lucy Inkoos. Also in the office in image—physically, he was around the world in the middle of the Gobi Gardens, in the capital of Earth—was Minister Shrigg. He had been bald since he was a boy, and gave the impression that ever since he had been too busy to find time to have the condition cured. His solid presence seemed to embarrass van Heemskirk terribly.

"Is there a connection?" he was saying as Alida and Laverne entered. Again, when they were seated, he said, "Is there a connection?"

"As far as can be seen, I doubt it," van Heemskirk said, and mopped his face with a kerchief matching his shirt.

"All right. There will have to be an inquiry, of course." Shrigg spoke with the satisfied tone of a man to whom official inquiries were the main business of life. To him, they were. Forty planets couldn't be governed; they had to govern themselves and co-operate where possible. Earth, one planet, was itself already too big to govern. It had to be run, like a machine of immense complexity, by experts. Shrigg was not an expert; van Heemskirk was. The knowledge rankled, and the

opportunity to inquire into an expert's shortcomings was the chance Shrigg and those like him waited for.

Captain Inkoos stirred on her seat. She looked Shrigg's image straight in the eye.

"Why?" she said. "I have already established the facts as they happened. Jacob Chen—like all programmers—depended on his own confidence in himself. Perhaps he was impatient. He ventured to take part in this deadly ritual on Azrael, and one of the natives—as they say there—'took action' with a broad-bladed knife. It was Chen's fault, if anybody's. Local custom permits such killings. Afterwards it avenges them."

Alida, looking at the officer's dark strong face, felt a wakening of interest. To speak like that to Shrigg was not easy, however justified it might be.

Shrigg scowled. He said, "Why was he sent there? Why was he permitted to risk his life? Programmers are too rare and too valuable to be thrown away!" He leaned forward, his eyes on Captain Inkoos.

"Tell me," he purred, "did you not have your own programmer on board?"

Honestly . . . ! Alida looked for someone with whom to exchange a glance mocking Shrigg's naiveté, but Laverne was staring at Captain Inkoos,

and she and van Heemskirk both had their gaze on Shrigg.

"I did," Captain Inkoos said coldly. "I filed a request for a more competent programmer when my man failed to cope with the problem. I did not request Jacob Chen by name."

"Then who sent him out?" Shrigg rapped. "You, van Heemskirk?"

"I approved the assignment," van Heemskirk said. "He was the best man available."

SHRIGG gave a pleased nod. He looked round in image and in fact. "I see Laverne is with you," he said. "A good person, I imagine, to put my next question to. This—this murderous planet, as it has turned out to be: the background there must form part of the report of the inquiry. We must establish whether the request for an advanced programmer was justified; we must establish why Jacob Chen put himself in the dangerous position that resulted in his death. You're in charge of the adjustment of mores, Laverne—make your recommendation!"

The psychologist gave a faint smile. "Without the facts?" he said. "Without a programmer having worked over the entire background?"

Shrigg was taken aback. He said, "Why—well, I'll accept that,

then. Captain Inkoos, your ship is still on Azrael?"

"Yes."

"And there's a representative of the planet here now, I gather. He'll be a good place to start the inquiry. I'll fly down tomorrow and see him."

Laverne said, "But Chen's work will have to be finished. For one thing, Responsible van Heemskirk here has to initiate negotiations to bring Azrael into the Bridge System."

Shrigg flushed, and Alida found herself wanting to chuckle. Logically, if Laverne could make a lion and a lamb die down together, he could make them get up. And Shrigg was no lion.

There was a pause. Laverne spoke into it just before Shrigg meant to. He said, "If no one else has a suggestion, I'd propose that you try and get Hans Demetrios to handle it. He's a young man, but he's shown exceptional promise, and I've just finished studying his analysis of this other world that's been contacted: Ipewell. I'm impressed."

"I know him," Alida said. "I support the proposal. Moses?"

"He has a growing reputation," van Heemskirk agreed. "But he's rather inexperienced. And he's still in training, working with a scoutship."

"Perhaps it would be better not to risk another advanced programmer," Shrigg said with

what he intended for sarcasm. It rasped Alida's nerves like the dying scream of a wild beast.

There was no reply. They all merely looked at Shrigg.

Jacob Chen is dead, Alida said to herself. He was killed. Strange: a neutral fact. Because he was a rather neutral person? Hans, though, was too young to be neutral. She'd met him several times and liked him well.

Because nobody else was saying anything, she uttered the question which had been burning her mind since she came into the room. She was surprised to find how intense her voice was when she spoke.

"Jorgen Thorkild," she said. "What happened to him? Did you say a breakdown?"

And behind the words, a memory of Saxena.

"While talking to the delegate from Azrael," van Heemskirk said. And added doubtfully, "We don't know why. But I expect we may hear soon."

VI

WHERE are you going, Hans?" the voice said emphatically from the doorway of the cabin.

Hans Demetrios looked up. The sliding panel had been pushed back halfway, silent in its self-lubricating grooves. Through the opening he saw

Gay Logan, her lips parted and shiny-moist, her eyes narrowed a little and very bright.

"Earth," he said. "They sent for me. Come in."

"Earth!" She was taken aback. Her eyes darted over the disarray in the large, comfortable cabin—everything had been taken out of the closets and laid on the table, the bunk, the floor. There were gaps in the arrangement here and there; he had already packed almost half his belongings.

Then she opened the panel all the way, stepped through, closed it again and stood with her back against it. She said, "You didn't tell me you were going."

"I'm sorry." He folded his microfilmreader and dropped it in the case he was currently filling. Then he gathered up the first of his thousands of microbooks.

Looking at him, Gay thought: yes, he is sorry. He means it. But he doesn't mean he's sorry he didn't tell me—not directly. To be exact, he's sorry it didn't occur to him to tell me. He didn't give enough weight to the possibility that I'd care.

She said, "When did you hear?"

Not pausing in the intricate task of sorting and stowing the microbooks, Hans glanced at the wall-clock. He said, "An hour ago, almost."

An hour. Maybe that accounted for—but then she realized she was fooling herself. She said, "It must be very urgent, then. Have you finished on Ipewell, or did they tell you to drop everything?"

"Part of both," he said. (Oh, the hunger in these men's eyes!) "I am finished here. The culture analysis is done—it's rather plain because the population is low and homogeneous. And the Bridge program is done. But even if it were not, I think they'd have sent me back if they really needed me."

"What's it about, anyway?" Probing. Cautious.

"They killed Jacob Chen on Azrael. They're sending me to finish his work there. It's a great honor." He put away the last of the microbooks and began on the recording crystals.

Gay said nothing for a long time. She closed her eyes. On the darkness of the lids she saw herself. You couldn't say this wasn't attractive. She was of a rare type, fine-boned, fair-haired, with violet eyes and a flawless skin that was always startlingly tanned. He had said what other men had said, in his own detached weighing-it-up fashion that somehow made the statement all the more honest and precious. He had said, "You're beautiful."

She opened her eyes. He was

sorting the crystals with one hand, touching them into some preferred order on the table with the tips of his fingers. She put out one arm and took the fingers of his other hand with her own.

"Hans," she said. "Look at me."

He prepared himself to be interrupted in that way she had seen so often before, as it were double-checking the arrangement of all the facts he was holding in his head to be certain he would know it when he turned his full attention back to it, and obeyed. He smiled.

SHE pulled herself forward from the door by the hand which held his and put her other arm around his neck, kissing him fiercely on the lips and cheeks. He did respond to the embrace. He did, she was certain, know how to enjoy it. And yet—

She snatched herself away from him. "All right," she said wearily. "All right. Go on packing your things."

He hesitated. She resumed her place with her back against the door, this time linking her hands behind the small of her back and pressing them hard to the smooth resilient panel.

"Go on!" she said. "That was—sort of to say goodbye."

"Maybe it won't be goodbye," Hans said, smiling again, but

turning to the table as he did so. His fingers went back to the quick, flickering movements of a few moments ago as though there had been no interruption. "You sound as though they were going to kill me too."

Even as a joke, it hurt. She said, "What happened?"

He told her, baldly, as it had come to him: the planet Azrael; the unique reality of pain; the wall of not-understanding against which the visitors had battered; the misgivings they had felt about tying in a planet to the Bridge system whose culture they could not weigh, measure and make predictions for; the fate of Jacob Chen who also failed to understand.

"And what concerns you is that that's an honor," Gay said thoughtfully. "To be sent for."

"Isn't it?" he answered. Miraculously the confused scattering of his belongings was melting like frost in sunlight, all stowed neatly in six oblong cases. Like a conjuring trick. "What I meant when I said it won't be goodbye—I might be sent back, or perhaps we'll see each other on leave. Where are you going when the Bridge crew takes over here?"

She ignored the question. She said, "Hans, what really gives you pleasure in life? What makes you want to keep going?"

She saw the beginning of a

polite answer on his lips, and for once reacted faster than he could. "I don't mean me!" she flared. "I know about you with me. I know—how could I not? But it doesn't go deep. It doesn't reach all the way down into you, to where you really are."

He sat down on a chair which he might have placed beforehand for this moment. He gave a half-shy smile. It was that smile she had seen when they first met, which had startled awake in her the feeling that was now turning to a rough scar in memory.

"It's a different universe," he said.

"I thought of it like that," she agreed slowly. "The other night—out there, when the two boys came."

"Well—it's true. I can't help it, Gay. I am that way. They say, and I don't know how it's possible, but it fits—they say that it's a response to environment that produced people like me. How do I get pleasure from life? You're right—my work goes deeper into the part of me where I live than anything else ever can. It's so demanding . . ."

His eyes unfocused. He stared towards the wall, left of the door, not seeing it.

"It makes one terrified," he said abruptly. "Because this engages everything, every single faculty, like clinging with your fingers and toes to a sheer rock

wall. You inch up, and every inch is an achievement, and one slip is the end. I say it's terrifying. Anyone else can fail, and start over. I don't think I could. I imagine that's why Jacob Chen had to risk death, because he couldn't live and remember failure. It would have destroyed him.

"And yet once you succeed for a while, you don't want to do anything else. Nothing else uses so much of you! And you get the payment for it in personal esteem, the most selfish kind of admiration of what you've done, which helps a little and isn't enough, and sometimes the extra comes, which is enough. The two boys—you were just talking about them."

"Yes." Her voice shook perceptibly.

"They're going to be liberated. I know. I did the analysis of this culture, broke it down into symbols, weighted them, put them in the memory banks, ran some tests for interaction with Earth and the other planets in the Bridge System. This culture is sterile. It's going to break apart, and people here will be able to breathe again for the first time since the days of the original colonists. The look in those boys' eyes. You saw it?"

Again she said, "Yes." Barely breathing it.

"When they build the Bridge

to Ipewell, the computers will instruct the Bridge crew. But I instructed the computers. I set those boys free."

He seemed suddenly embarrassed at having talked so openly, and got to his feet. "Well, I guess I have to check out," he said. "They're setting up the Bridge for Earth in three hours' time. I'm sorry, Gay."

"How old are you, Hans?" she said.

"Twenty-two."

"How old was Jacob Chen?"

"Chen? Oh—must have been sixty, or perhaps older. Or again perhaps not. We tend to be infant prodigies."

"When did you first discover you would make a programmer?"

"I didn't. Other people found out for me. I was just about learning to read when they caught on."

She gave a bitter smile. "So I'm about seventeen years too late. What the hell! I'll try and remind myself that I'm not the only one who's going to be unlucky—setting her heart on you."

"For what?" he said.

There was a silence as tangible as stone.

PLUGGING in for Earth now," said the voice of a technician, unemotionally filtered by the hear-this system. "Watch the green light."

A uniformed junior technician leaned on the trolley carrying Hans's six cases; when the green light came on in the freight compartment of the Bridge platform he gave the trolley an accurate push, and it rolled with a hushing of soft tires into its proper place. Then the green light also flooded the personnel platform, and Hans moved forward, thinking deeply.

A Bridge. Simple enough in principle. The only characteristics distinguishing one volume of space from another were due to the presence of the matter and energy it "contained." All worlds suitable for human habitation were roughly the same distance from the same kind of sun, all of similar mass. It was not hard to reduce the residual distinctions to an effective null. Then, to provide a means of identifying a particular destination, you could introduce another, planned, difference.

Hans Demetrios walked into a zone of space identical with one on Earth. It *was* on Earth. It had taken a hundred gigawatts of power per kilogram of transferred mass to maintain the identity of the two spaces during transmission, and the computers that kept unbroken watch over that identity would probably have noted, reacted to and cancelled out about ten to the eighth information-bits corresponding

to incipient discrepancies. And he, Hans Demetrios, had told the computers what the discrepancies were.

He was thinking of Gay Logan. Intellectually, he knew he had not hurt her; she had hurt herself, by not thinking what she wanted through before trying to get it. If she had thought long enough, she would not have wanted it. Because Hans Demetrios was a programmer, a man whose ultimate task would be to instruct the computers which supervised the running of Earth, or the Bridge System, or perhaps of some planet other than Earth. And so long as he made no mistake whatever, he would grow. Unique. Unreachable. Moving into zones of experience where no individual but himself could possibly count.

And Gay Logan was a charming, attractive, highly intelligent girl, and nothing more.

Yet to know that someone had been hurt because of him affected him, just as he was affected by knowing that people had benefited because of him.

For most people it was enough to think. But a programmer had to know how he thought, and why he thought as he did, because the machines with which he worked could not do that for themselves.

He was on Earth, emerging in the bright light of one of the

terminal rooms set aside for space-service traffic. A bored-faced technician in an overhanging vantage bubble was cutting off the power supply. On the floor of the room itself a man was sitting waiting. As Hans came through, he got up.

"Programmer Demetrios," he said. "I'm from Relations. Is that all your gear?"

He gestured towards the freight platform.

"That's all," Hans confirmed.

"Good. I don't know how your local day was where you came from—anyway, you'll be relieved to know that you aren't going to be pitchforked into your work at once. I have quarters arranged for you, where you'll find transcripts of all the events that have led up to your being called back to Earth. It's about nineteen hours here. At ten tomorrow you're to report to the Supervisor of Relations, Alida Marquis, and she will brief you further. Right?"

With half his mind, Hans accepted the words he heard. With the other half, he was thinking about the death of Jacob Chen.

VII

SOMETIMES in dreams she saw the Bridge System like a fountain of rainbows. The rainbow bridge went up to Valhalla, and the heroes passed that way.

But a bridge for heroes was part of mythology. The dream ended with the moving of the rainbow, frustrating as in life—always in the next field, over the next fence, till it faded away.

And sometimes Saxena was there, who had been no hero, who had yielded to the temptation of poison.

Despondent, Alida Marquis wandered through the forty-world city between the hills and the sea where all the planetary populations whose privilege was the Bridge came together and were friends. There was nothing at Glory tonight. A whisper had gone through the variegated buildings like a driving gale, and the people like dead leaves went scurrying with it to seek the newest latest.

Going with them in a chased golden mask and a cloak which had she remained at Glory she would have cast aside an hour ago, Alida felt her mind cycle like a recording set to repeat unceasingly. She could look about her at the miniature worlds she passed by or through, and where they usually filled her with exhilaration—her work!—tonight there was this lowering sensation of pressure and decay, as though a dank warm mist had closed invisibly on the land.

Thorkild had suffered a breakdown. On each of the sectors of the city which was effectively a

different world with different people, dialects, customs, arts, she could feel—nearly see—a thing like a monstrous stubby hoof crushing down: the end of a rainbow turned to drab fog-brown, the reality of a Bridge.

Thorkild had suffered a breakdown. She did not like Thorkild very much because he was not Saxena and he held Saxena's post and Saxena had killed himself without telling her, his mistress of years, the reason why. But like or not like was irrelevant: Thorkild and she were bound by what they were.

Thorkild had suffered a breakdown. He was young for his post of fantastic responsibility, qualified purely by what he could do, as Saxena had been. So was she; she was only four years older than Thorkild and she was Supervisor of Relations. It was not only in the barely comprehensible field where the programmers worked that you could point to evidence of a response to man-made environmental pressure, creating (?) or selecting for what was necessary.

Thirty-nine worlds. Forty. Forty-two. To relate them in any way at all was a task for the gods, and there were only men and women. There were the hand-ful (out of the whole race, how many thousand?) who could write a million-word program for the computers which were the

most important tool, could define a planetary culture so that a mindless machine could understand it. And there were the people—nearly as few—who could use the tools the programmers supplied. Alida Marquis. Jorgen Thorkild. Moses van Heemskirk. For all his politician-like mannerisms, he was of the clan, where Shrigg was not. Compare a big corporation, perhaps: a manager to say do so-and-so, and to ask why it was not done after all, and executives to find a way to do it, or not.

SHE was moving now into the sector which was a transplant of Riger's World: some of the plants here had pink leaves and the buildings were faced with a reddish resilient wood. Many, many people were coming here.

To these people, Alida thought, the Bridge System simply *was*. They were proud of it. They felt their prestige enhanced because Earth was geared to this service for mankind—to run the Bridges and expand their scope. They were glad to have them. But what interested them was a wild-bearded preacher from Riger's World who could do something peculiar with a snake.

And yet . . . if you took the Bridges away, these people would feel a lack, and be unhappy, and they would cast around for a re-

placement, and not finding one they would strike out blindly at each other. When Saxena killed himself, you had heard the wave of dismay go round the planet. Hurt without knowing why, people wondered, and questioned their reason for existence.

Nobody had planned *this* situation, though it could have been foreseen. The mere complexity, first of an Earth where people were not any longer ciphers to be reckoned with in the mass, but individuals at least partly able to invent creative goals, to use their lavish leisure and to think with some originality if need be, then of a loose and growing union of forty planets, had avalanched into being the people who were not free—who did the job because it was there, who had to do it because they were the people who could.

The most uncomfortable word in any human language, Alida thought, would be *conscience*. On a newly contacted world they killed Jacob Chen. Shrigg could hold all the inquiries he liked, as a man turns up wet flagstones and sees grubs writhe underneath for the discomfort of the light. And he would make no one suffer half as much as could the simple knowledge: I did the things that led to it.

By now she was pressed into a crowd, many of the people being masked, which was surging up

the outside slope of the little amphitheatre at the center of the Riger's World sector of the poly-plane city. They were laughing and joking on every side, passing gaudy containers of liquor, perhaps celebrating the mere fact that there were so many human worlds and Bridges to join them. The Earthside folk who were visitors here came mostly by couples; the others were resident staff-members from off the planet.

In the jostling *mêlée*, she felt a man come close, and a hand inquired under her cloak. It would be meant as a kind of flattery, and if she had stayed at Glory and danced with a crowd she would have taken it as such, but tonight it had all gone wrong. She tilted back her mask and looked at the masked face of the man who had touched her, and he hesitated one moment, meeting her eyes.

It occurred to her, as he turned and forced his way away from her, that she would not have liked to face a mirror wearing the look that must have been there.

Suddenly disgusted with herself and the close pressure of people—because it was like a realization of the illusion she had suffered all evening long: the fog-brown weightless suffocating pressure of the Bridge System—she began to thrust her way at

random among the crowd. To her surprise, she found herself isolated, moments later, on a little knoll commanding a clear view down into the heart of the amphitheatre.

PEOPLE were standing, sitting or lolling all down the interior slope, to the very edge of the low stage; it was hard for them all to get a view. Yet this knoll was empty—perhaps ten square yards of level, raised ground—except for one extremely tall man in a sweeping robe of blue embroidered with silver. On his head was a high fur hat, with a fringe dropping over his forehead.

From Azrael, Alida realized. The shock was great. She had not counted on chancing across anyone from the deadly world where Jacob Chen had died. The encounter was something to be prearranged, to happen in a week or so's time when Moses van Heemskirk had finished the preliminary work and the formal negotiations for the Azrael Bridge began.

Confused, she found herself staring at the man from Azrael. How curious that he should be isolated like this! He had not noticed her come up on the knoll with him; he was staring down at the stage below.

After a moment, Alida also turned her attention that way.



She saw a man in a brown shirt and loose brown breeches standing at the foot of a gilded caduceus perhaps four meters high, the eyes of the twined snakes lit up from within. This man would be Rungley. He had an untidy, light brown beard and a thick mop of unkempt hair. Behind him and all around the foot of the giant caduceus were a crowd of children singing something in edgy shrill voices; she could not make out the words, but the tune was catchy and rhythmical.

Beside the stage, staring up at Rungley, were a group of men and women in dark clothing. She thought she recognized—or was she guessing?—members of the

resident staff from Riger's, come out to see what their fellow-citizen was up to. At the moment, there was some small argument going on with a person in the crowd.

The argument ended while she was still straining to make out details. Something was passed up from the crowd, handled with gingerly care: a box. Rungley took it in a brawny hand and slapped the lid open. Reaching inside, he seized something that squirmed. A snake.

With part of her mind Alida thought that it was strange how strong an effect the sight of a snake had on these people most of whom had probably never seen

one except on film or in a zoo. A physical wave of silence seemed to pass through the crowd. Achingly, they all stared at the preacher.

He bent his head forward, putting his thick tongue out between his lips, and the snake struck.

By the fangs sunk in his tongue, he drew its head into his mouth. And bit.

And spat the dead head to the ground, and with it a reddish spray of his own blood.

Here and there she heard screaming, but muffled by pounding in her own ears. She found she could do nothing but stare and go on staring.

"Alida!" a voice said close to her, and she still could not tear her eyes away. The voice was familiar, though; it belonged to Koriot Angoss, the Earthside representative of Riger's. She answered accordingly.

"All this!" she said. "You've made a bad mistake, haven't you?"

"But he's a cheap mountebank!" Angoss said unhappily. "It was someone in the crowd—brought him a snake, I don't know where from—and he did what you just saw. That's the third or fourth time today. And it's a trick that Persian conjurers used to do, and on Riger's we find it too disgusting to be entertaining. But here—!"

ALIDA managed to look away from Rungley at last. She turned, and found herself facing, not Koriot Angoss, but the hawk-face of the man from Azrael, over Angoss's shoulder. His eyes were dark and astonishingly sharp.

He said, "This man—one of you is from his home world?"

"I am," Angoss said shortly.

"I present myself: Lancaster Long of the planet Azrael. I have been watching for some while. I have seen the preacher bitten several times by poisonous snakes, and he has shown no ill-effects."

"He's immune," Alida said.

A look of distaste crossed Long's regal features. He said, "And knows it?"

"Certainly. Do you imagine he'd risk it if he weren't?"

"I see," Long said in a tone like a frigid wind. "I had hoped that here for once was a person who took his life seriously. Instead, it turns out that he is a cynical trickster. It's of a piece with everything else I've seen since I was invited here."

His scornful manner nettled Alida against her will. She said, "Explain!"

"Why should you need such a simple thing explained? A man is not poisoned by water; would you go to see a man drink water? That is how you have persuaded me to waste my time." He

swept his robe around him and began to stride down the hillside.

"Who's that?" Angoss demanded. Alida told him what she knew of Long's background in a few short sentences, following his tall figure with her eyes and noting how people made way for him automatically.

Angoss got the point before she did, and with a wordless cry started out in Long's wake. Even then she had to stand wondering and foolish for a moment before she too understood and hastened down the hill.

By the time she came to the stage—people not making way for her as they had done for Long—she was too late to interfere. Angoss had been in time to interfere, but not to stop it.

Many people in the crowd had brought snakes for Rungley; how they had found them all Alida didn't waste time guessing. As one was being passed up for the preacher to play with, Long had stepped in.

There was no denying it. His scorn was magnificent, and the brawny figure of Rungley quailed before him as he raised the snake he had seized and turned shouting to the crowd.

"This man!" he cried. "This petty fellow Rungley! He is immune to venom! He risks nothing with these snakes he allows to strike him! His actions are a lie and a sham!"

A swell of grumbling complaint at having their fun interrupted disturbed the crowd. He stilled it with an imperious gesture, the snake hanging from his fingers like the short lash of a whip.

"I!" Long said. "I do not know if I am immune—see *this!*"

And he shook his lean arm bare of his loose sleeve and offered it for the snake to strike.

VIII

FOR a long time after she came into her office for the new day's work, Alida sat staring at the vast window overlooking the polyplanet sector of the city. When perhaps ten minutes had gone by, she gave a sudden bitter chuckle and crossed the room to the multiprinter unit.

She fed a sheet of black paper into it. Then she set the controls for maximum type-size and tapped out seven words on the keys. The machine hummed for a moment; then it delivered the paper with the words printed in large red letters.

She took the paper and walked to the window, where she pasted it up in the exact middle of the main pane. Then she went back to her desk and sat staring at it.

It read: WHY IS A MOUSE WHEN IT SPINS?

After a while the answer didn't seem funny any more. She turned her mind effortfully to her work.

A few minutes before ten, when Hans Demetrios was due to arrive, it occurred to her to call the hospital where they had taken Thorkild. She waited, wondering why it had suddenly become important to her to know how he was.

The secretary putting the call through came back to report that Dr. Lorenzo wasn't available on a solido circuit at the moment and to ask what she wanted done.

"Get me a sound line," Alida sighed. She stared at the black oblong sign on the window. Shortly, a voice rang out from the speaker in her desk.

"Supervisor Marquis," it said. "Lorenzo here. In view of Director Thorkild's status I've taken personal charge of his case. I'm afraid I have no reassurance for you right now."

"How—no reassurance?"

"I'd have to use jargon to make myself clear. Call it a major personality failure, if you like."

"Due to what?" Alida felt suddenly cold, and reached out to turn the heating to full with the manual over-ride.

"I shouldn't commit myself," Lorenzo said. "We're looking for the cause now. It'll take several days."

"You'll keep me in touch? Director Thorkild and I work in close association; things will be difficult without him."

"I understand," Lorenzo said.

When she had broken the connection, Alida told her secretary to get her a newsfax. It was brought in less than a minute. She scanned it closely, barely hearing the secretary say that Hans Demetrios had arrived, giving an answer only because the words echoed in her memory afterwards.

News: the investigation ordered into the death of Jacob Chen, advanced programmer, was in preparation. Crowds in the polyplanet sector to see the preacher Rungley. Delegate from new planet Azrael hospitalized after snake-bite. Statement by Rungley explaining Long's sickness by lack of faith in—in whatever Rungley had faith in. The enzyme *S*-hematinase, presumably. Statement by Koriot Angoss of Riger's. Negotiations for an Ipewell Bridge to proceed as scheduled. Those for an Azrael Bridge tentatively postponed pending the result of the inquiry into the death of Jacob Chen—

"But he can't do that!" Alida said aloud, reaching for the call-switch on the desk. In mid-movement she froze. She had the sudden insane impression that she was seeing Saxena.

Then the illusion passed. It was Hans Demetrios standing in the entrance of the office, and the only resemblance was that look—that inquiring, hungry

look which Saxena had also worn.

She had never seen Thorkild with that look.

SHE pushed aside the newsfax sheet and gestured for Hans to sit down. He did so, moving economically, and glanced up at the window to read her new sign.

"I see your point," he said.

"How do you mean?" she countered.

"The answer to your question, of course. Isn't it 'the higher, the fewer'?"

A smile came unbidden to her face. She said, "That's right. I hadn't expected you to know. I hadn't expected many people at all to know. It must be a very old bit of nonsense."

"Twentieth century," Hans said briefly. "Are you one of the few?"

"That was why I put it up."

For a few moments they sat and looked at each other. Alida found her sense of chill leaving her. To know the answer to the question, and to understand why she had put it up, was more than she would have expected from Thorkild, Saxena, anyone else she had ever met. Previously, when she had spoken with Hans, she had taken him for a merely nice young man. They were twenty or so years apart in age, after all. She found herself hoping she had not patronized him unduly.

She said, "I imagine you'll go

higher than I ever shall. I don't envy you."

"It's not something we choose," Hans answered. "When I came in, you were saying something about, 'He can't do that!' I've seen today's news. Were you talking about Shrigg?"

"That's right." Her thoughts had gone wandering down an illogical byway; she chased them back. "A Bridge is the right and privilege of any human-occupied world. I don't care how many people are worried about Azrael. Shrigg can't hold back on the offer of a Bridge."

"I wouldn't press the point too hard," Hans said.

She stared at him. "You've worked on this already?" she suggested.

He nodded, taking out a file of documents from a portfolio he had placed on his lap. He didn't look down at them.

"You said you'd seen today's news. So have I. Do you know why Lancaster Long did what he did—allowed that snake to bite him?"

"I was there when it happened."

"But you don't know?"

"I suppose I don't," she said wearily.

"I haven't spoken to him yet—though I'm going to try and do so—but I can guess. He did it because he didn't know if the snake could kill him."

She turned the words over in her mind and shook her head.

"How's Director Thorkild?" Hans said.

"I—why do you suddenly change the subject?"

"I haven't changed the subject."

A huge half-formed terror shadowy at the back of her mind, Alida struggled to make sense of that. Almost, she did—but the sense was worse than the shadow. She said, "I called the hospital and spoke to Lorenzo."

"The psychologist?"

"Yes. He's taken personal charge of Jorgen's case."

"And Lorenzo said—?"

"He called it a major personality failure, and said that it would take several days to establish the reason."

Hans Demetrios glanced down at the papers he held. He said, "He was talking with Lancaster Long, I understand. Just before it happened."

"Is that what you meant when you said you weren't changing the subject?"

"Of course."

"But how could questions—presumably quite innocent questions—from a stranger upset Jorgen so badly?"

"They were the right questions," Hans said. "But you don't see what I mean, so I'll have to leave it."

"No!" Alida said, and realized

as she spoke how sharp and rude the tone of her voice was. "Uh—I mean no, please try and make it clearer if you can."

HANS shrugged and leaned back. He said, "The higher, the fewer. Out where Jorgen Thorkild is, or where Jacob Chen was, there are very few indeed. I can feel inside myself how it will be if I reach that kind of level. I can appreciate the loneliness, the feeling that you're being used by other people, and only you can know what it costs you. You have to reward yourself with hollow self-praise."

The half-formed terror was still in her mind. But now also Alida felt a growing excitement.

"The crucial thing is that you must be able to persuade yourself that your slaving work is worthwhile. If you falter in that—or if you are driven as Jacob Chen was to a suspicion that you're faltering for another reason—you break apart. Jorgen Thorkild has broken apart. I've made a few inquiries, of Moses van Heemskirk and others. And I'm going to take a gamble which may break me."

"Which is?"

"I'm going to make the only assumption—as far as I can see—which Jacob Chen did not permit himself. He did not let himself believe that the people of

Azrael are deliberately, consciously, knowingly dedicated to—destruction.”

He raised his hand to his face, and Alida saw with a thrill of horror that his forehead was running with sweat.

“Don’t try and press Shrigg,” Hans said. “The later and longer you can postpone the negotiations for the Azrael Bridge the better it will be. The more time I’ll have—I hope—to prove myself wrong.”

“And break apart?” Alida said unsteadily.

“I have to risk that.” Hans’s knuckles were white on the hand with which he grasped his file of documents. “Do you see why now?”

“I—no!” Alida said forcefully.

“They say: pain is more real than pleasure. Death is ultimately real. They take reality seriously. They make life seem justifiable by refusing to mask its precarious nature. They would be ashamed of themselves if they did otherwise. We on Earth do it all the time. Lancaster Long was driven by shame when he offered his arm for that snake to bite. He was trying to make the audience see life as he sees it: a thing to be made real by the ending of it. This is alien to me. So far I haven’t made it clear even to myself. I’m groping.”

“But what if—?” Alida broke off before she could voice her

thought. She recognized that she was too afraid of it.

HANS looked at her with a kind of pity, but it was not a pity which could make her angry. He said, “Earth has built an ideal for itself, this past century or so. We’ve made the service of the Bridge System our reason for living. It’s our source of pride in ourselves. Are you going to press a Bridge on Azrael against the will of Long?”

She shuddered. It was a long, internal-shaking shudder almost orgasmic in its completeness. She said, “Because if the offer is refused—”

“He will *want* to refuse it!” Hans barked. “It will be the restoration of obsession with death to what he thinks of as a sick culture! Ours! What we most greatly prize, he will devalue—a cheap toy! As he thinks of the universe: it is easier to destroy than to build, therefore destruction is more real and people who forget that fact are infantile and inferior! On Azrael they ritualize killing. A man makes his life real by killing and being killed. A man who believes what Long believes can best serve his idea of reality by destroying the work of another. He can, and if we let him he will, destroy our work simply by refusing to have a Bridge on his planet.”

"Why should he refuse it? The benefits it will bring—"

"Are nothing compared to the results of simply saying no."

There was a long silence. Dully, she picked up the newsfax sheet and pushed it into a waste-disposal chute. She said, "And you're prepared to be wrong, which might break you."

"If I'm not wrong, you can see what will become of me anyway." Again he had to wipe his face. He said then, "I am a doomed man. I have been tried and sentenced without knowing it. And I am very much afraid."

Alida tried to find something to say, and failed. Hans gathered his documents and put them away, and rose to his feet.

"I'm going to see Long in the hospital," he said. "And I shall see van Heemskirk again, and probably Laverne, and perhaps a few other people. But I can't delay going to Azrael for very long."

Unexpectedly, on the last word, the look came to his face again—the haunted look which had made her think for an instant that she was seeing Saxena. She found words pouring from her.

"Hans—look, you must talk about this, you can't go out alone on this! Why should you? The disaster is everyone's if you prove to be right. You must share that half of it at least."

He looked unhappily at her.

"The higher the fewer, all right!" she said. "But not fewer than necessary—that's stupid!"

He hesitated. Then he shrugged. "All right. I'll see you this evening for dinner. Will that do?"

She sank back into her chair. Eventually she said, "In the end, you're going to be very cruel. But you can't help it. I'll see you at nineteen hours."

He nodded and went out. When he had gone, she tore the silly sign from the window and threw it away.

IX

YOU are Jorgen Thorkild," said the voice from the box. "To be oneself as fully as possible is an adequate goal."

"You're only a machine," Thorkild told it, and picked it up from the white table where it stood. For a moment he hefted it meditatively, and then got to his feet.

The air was warm and cloying, syrup-heavy with the scent of the huge flowers covering every bush of the hundreds in the hospital grounds. They were artfully laid out to imitate nature, punctuated here and there with shallow pools on whose mirror-still surface lay nenuphars pink, blue and yellow.

Thorkild judged the distance to the nearest of the pools, drew back his arm, and let fly.

"I am a machine, true," the box allowed judiciously. "But the principles on which I was constructed—by human beings, remember—"

And splash.

Thorkild dusted his hands and sat down again. He could be certain that within ten minutes or a quarter-hour Dr. Lorenzo would discover what had happened and come out to remonstrate; nonetheless, even that much peace from the tireless arguments of the machine would be worth it.

He reached for the refrigerated glass which was now all that stood on the table beside him. It was not until he raised it to his lips that he caught sight of the naked girl standing dappled with shadow among the thick leaves of a nearby shrub. She was looking at him, large-eyed, tremulous, like a shy fawn.

"Nefret," he said. He put his glass back on the table.

"I saw you throw the box in the water," the girl said. A hint of awe tinged her voice. "You're lucky!"

"Lucky, Nefret?" Thorkild didn't mind talking to her; he had spoken to her several times since they let him out from sedation. Most of the time you could only talk to her—not with her.

"Yes." She hesitated. Then she looked to left and right among the branches of the shrub, and chose a thick stem heavy with gorgeous

waxy blossom. She snapped it off near the base. Holding it up before her like a torch, seeming to need its light before she dared step out on the open lawn, she took a few cautious steps towards Thorkild's chair. He saw that she had drawn open eyes on her breasts again, with mud from the edge of one of the ponds.

"Lucky?" Thorkild said again, uncomfortably. She had her own eyes, too, and they were terribly sharp. They reminded him a little of Lancaster Long's.

"They'll cure me," Nefret said. "But they won't cure you. You won't let them."

"You can't cure someone who isn't sick," Thorkild said.

"It's sick to be different," Nefret said. She lowered the raw end of her flowery branch to the ground, and began to pick off petals one by one. She didn't look at Thorkild again.

"I'm soft," she said eventually. "I can feel the cure going on inside me now. Like hands shaping wet clay. One day soon I'll be made over entirely. I won't be me any more. This is the third time, so I remember, you see. And I'm too soft to stop it. But you—you're hard. They won't shape you any other way than the way you are. If they go on trying they'll break you into little pieces and dust, and you'll sparkle in sunlight."

"How were you different, Ne-

fret?" Thorkild said. She was very young to be here for the third time, he thought—her body was half a child's, tight and firm under her brown skin.

"I don't want to be the same as everybody," she said. "I won't be happy. I'll only think I'm happy. I want to be the way I am."

A foot crunched on a gravel path. She let the branch fall and darted back into the bushes. She was gone before the top-most flower on the branch had reached the ground.

Thorkild took another pull at his drink before turning to see whose footfall he had heard. It was Lorenzo.

"You got here quickly," Thorkild said.

Lorenzo blinked. He was never happy in full sun—probably he had an optic weakness too small for convenient therapy. In his velvet voice he said, "I suppose you threw it in the lily-pond this time."

He hooked his foot under the bar of a chair on the other side of Thorkild's table and sat down.

"Only because you weren't around for me to break it over your head," Thorkild answered.

He saw Lorenzo wince a little, and was amused. The doctor was of medium height, his hair crisp and brown, his shoulders rather narrow and his legs and arms exceptionally thin. It had occurred to Thorkild the first time

he met him that he was afraid of people bigger than himself, and knew it, and was ashamed at the irrational reaction. Thorkild was much bigger.

"All those voice-boxes do, you know," Lorenzo said after a pause, "is to verbalize the subconscious doubts we found when we analyzed you on your arrival. If you're going to be honest with yourself, you'll have to know if they make sense or not."

THORKILD emptied his glass. He said, "I've put you in rather a quandary, haven't I? If I do break one of the boxes over your head, that'll mean anti-violence therapy, and this will deprive me of whatever makes me so useful to other people. And if I simply pay them no attention, as I have been doing, I'm not going to be useful anyway. It's splendid.

Lorenzo stared impassively at him. He said, "Alida Marquis has been inquiring after you. I saw her this morning. She seems very upset."

"First time," Thorkild said.

"Why have you changed your attitude towards her?"

"Why has she changed hers towards me?" Thorkild shrugged.

"For the past several months, at least," Lorenzo said, "You've been beseeching her to make a contract with you, to apply for two children and three if you could swing the deal."

"I seem to remember," Thorkild agreed warily.

"You don't talk about a three-child contract as a joke," Lorenzo suggested.

"Alida didn't talk about it," Thorkild countered with a smile. It wasn't a good smile; it was too bitter. "She had as little to do with me as she could. As little as I would let her. I should have thought she'd have been glad to get me out of her hair."

He shifted slightly on his seat, ostentatiously turning his head to look at the bushes into which Nefret had disappeared. "Do you frown on affairs between your patients, doctor? I rather fancy little Nefret. She ran away when she heard you coming. Maybe if you'd go away again she might come back."

"Oddly enough, you mean that," Lorenzo said. He sounded puzzled. Thorkild shot him a sharp glance. That was the difficulty with this man. He *was* intelligent, and no contempt anyone else felt for him could mask the fact.

There was a brief silence.

"I see," Lorenzo said at last, and got to his feet. Thorkild stopped him with a gesture as he was about to walk off.

"What do you see?" he demanded.

Lorenzo looked down at him with an expression of some pity. "Your pride must have been bad-

ly wounded," he said. "Maybe it's as well that you've finished up here. Wounded pride is no basis on which to found a marriage. And it would have been disastrous for the children."

"What do you *mean*?" Thorkild barked.

"You can still be angry," Lorenzo said. "You're human, if you can be angry. Alida Marquis was Saxena's mistress, wasn't she?"

"Yes. But that has nothing to do with wounded pride. I've given up pride, doctor. I gave it up when I realized that all I had to be proud of was how good I was at being used by other people."

"And when, precisely, did you realize that?" Lorenzo purred.

Thorkild considered the question. He said, "Yes, I do know—the moment when I answered Lancaster Long's question about my work, and then I saw Uskia with the speaker plugged into her navel so her unborn child could eavesdrop on what was going on. And I thought: I work like hell. I exhaust myself. I have to sweat out petty details and grand policies, and I have to stand father to other people's decisions—which may be wrong, but if they are, I'm blamed. For the sake of idiots. For the sake of superstitious, knuckleheaded, potbellied morons like Uskia. I should be proud of *that*?"

"Saxena killed himself," Lorenzo said. "Why?"

Thorkild looked away. "I don't know," he muttered. "They said it was through exhaustion and overwork. I never believed that. If anyone knows, Alida does—and she's always refused to tell me."

I PUT it to you," Lorenzo said, "that you never cared for Alida Marquis as a person. She symbolized to you that status which Saxena, your predecessor, achieved. You knew he killed himself. You were terrified that you might do the same. You felt you were not even as good as he was, and therefore the risk was even greater in your case. To try and stave off this haunting terror, you struggled to compel Alida to do more for you than she had done for Saxena—to marry you, in fact, and acknowledge that you were a better man than Saxena. Instead of which she has refused even to become your mistress. That's how your pride was wounded. That's why you broke, and had to come here."

A sudden wave of happiness went through Thorkild. He raised a sunny grin to Lorenzo. "I think you're right," he said. "And I don't think it matters any more. Why should I have to convince myself I'm better than any other human statistic?"

"Consider my job! I'm a hy-

draulics engineer, supervising the flow of human beings every day of my working life, processing them exactly as I process freight! Can something which behaves as a statistic *be* more than a statistic? I could get as much from a bale of textiles as from a traveller going by Bridge."

"Nonsense," Lorenzo said. "Can a bale talk?"

"Imagine! I approach a crowd of emigrants and say, 'Who are you?' They'll say, 'Ivan Chang going to Platt's World', or 'Mary Schultz going to Kayowa'. I go to the freight section and I look at labels. They say, 'Cultivating machinery going to Platt's World,' or 'Educational materials, Kayowa'. And I learn just as much, and just as little."

"But if—"

"We've created this magnificent network of Bridges. We can ship people from star to star and all the time we're scouting for more planets to link into the System. Pushing out with all the superb intellection of ivy sprawling up a tree, the System spreads. Daily traffic shows a predictable standard deviation from an average which increases equally predictably—all as neat as any corporation accounts sheet. If you can treat people like that, they're lumps! Clods! I'm people. And that therefore includes me."

"Human beings create goals for themselves. Without goals human beings are merely vegetables." Lorenzo blinked.

"So you believe in destiny!" Thorkild laughed harshly.

"We make our own—to fulfill our goals. Ultimately, perhaps, our destiny is to understand the cosmos."

"And then die."

"Not necessarily. We've always set ourselves new objectives to replace old ones. Possibly there's something beyond."

Thorkild yawned hugely. He was in control of himself again. He said, "You can say the same of—of a speck of fungus-spawn shot out of a puffball. Maybe it too comforts itself with the promise that there's something beyond this patch of leaf-mould. Well, we're past the leaf-mould—and what do we have? Action for action's sake, growth for the sake of growth."

"And all this was made clear to you by a few words from Lancaster Long?" Lorenzo suggested with a hinted sneer.

Thorkild refused to rise to the bait. He said, "If you like to put it that way. I was worried and overworked, and he asked me why I endured this. Whereupon I saw I had no need to."

He looked into his glass, but it was empty. Shrugging, he added, "If there are more people like him on his home world, they'll

jolt the rest of us when they tie in to the System."

Lorenzo hesitated. He looked suddenly aged. He said at last, his voice low and brittle, "They decided not to."

"They what?" Thorkild tensed, staring up at the doctor.

"Decided not to." Lorenzo gave a wan smile. "Think it over. Do you know what the name of his planet means?"

Thorkild didn't react, so Lorenzo went on. "Azrael," he said, "is the legendary name of the Angel of Death—and it wasn't chosen at random for his planet, either! If you're so sick of life, why don't you follow Saxena's example, instead of leaving the work to an outworld stranger?"

He spun on his heel and strode away. It was a long time before the look of haunted terror with which Thorkild watched him go changed to something a little nearer to the human.

X

BUT this is wrong," Alida said suddenly. "To come to him like beggars makes us all the more inferior to him."

In the entrance hall of the house which had been allotted to Lancaster Long for his stay on Earth she stood with Moses van Heemskirk, and with a score of other officials. It was expected that Laverne would come later;

he was arranging some final detail with Uskia regarding the establishment of an Ipewell area in the polyplanet sector of the city.

Many people had used this handsome building. Usually the period of negotiation had been long enough to allow some stamp of the occupant's personality—at least, of the character of his home world—to imprint on the place. No such trace of Lancaster Long could be sensed now.

Only now and then someone passed into view in an alcove, or crossed the hallway on soft shoes with a swish of a long dark-colored robe.

Moses van Heemskirk gave her a bitter smile which did not seem right for his round face. He said, "One man! And we hang on his decision as though on a rope, by the *neck!*"

"Are we wrong?" Alida said emptily.

"Could he be right?" van Heemskirk said, turning the question deftly and making it somehow far more dangerously valid.

There was a sound of doors opening, and they turned. That was the door of the room into which Minister Shrigg had disappeared.

"Why do we have to rely on *him?*" someone said in the crowd, barely above a whisper. But everyone waiting in the hall

could hear, and nodded agreement.

Then Shrigg came out, his face like a storm, flushed to the limits of his bald pate—scythed through the crowd to the main door and out, dragging his yes-men and his attendants in his wake like scraps of paper whirling in the wind of a fast vehicle. All eyes followed him despairingly. It was not until he was out of sight that Alida—and in the same moment, the rest of the watchers—saw Lancaster Long standing in the open doorway where Shrigg had passed.

With immense deliberation, Long hawked, pursed his lips, and spat on the floor where Shrigg's feet had been.

"Sold by a fool," Alida said.

"Could you have done better?" van Heemskirk countered, in the moment before Long's eyes sought him out among the crowd, Long's arm was raised imperiously to beckon him close. He went. They had all swallowed their pride by now.

"I shall return to Azrael today," Long said. "I, and those with me. You will instruct Captain Inkoos to get her ship off my planet immediately afterwards. I've had enough of argument."

Unconsciously he rubbed one forearm with the fingers of the other hand; Alida realized that he was touching the place where

the snake's fangs had sunk in.

"We look forward to your changing your mind soon," van Heemskirk said, defiantly staring up at the beaked face so far above his own. Alida was aware of some small admiration for his manner. He conveyed counter-contempt against Long's own; in words it would have been: you'll grow up, you'll learn better.

Long, though, took no notice. He said, "I've said this to Minister Shrigg, but he is wooden-headed and a booby, and you at least have some inkling of what I talk about. I want you to recognize the reason why I spurn your gilded bait, why we of Azrael have no respect for your elaborate toys."

HANS had said he would make the Bridge System seem like a toy, Alida remembered. But it was not good to think of Hans. He too was elusive—the end of a rainbow. She could touch and hold him, and never be near him. Perhaps she never would be near him. But the courage in him!

"Why take the time?" van Heemskirk said, with superbly affected boredom. "To analyze petty jealousy is a futile occupation. A child will persuade himself that another's—toy, if you like—is worthless, for the sake of comfort."

"Your jibes don't touch me," Long said. "And I cannot touch

you, because you live away from reality."

"I see," van Heemskirk said indifferently. "Well, hear me say this, at least."

"I've had enough of your babbling," Long answered.

"I think . . ." van Heemskirk said delicately, and did not end his sentence. But a wave of tension passed among those listening, and Alida found herself leaning fractionally forward. It seemed as though van Heemskirk was going to say something unexpected. Important? *Salvation?*

"Well?" Long rapped out.

Conscious that this was a moment he could dominate, van Heemskirk took his time. He spoke slowly, savoring the words.

"You have made your position quite clear, I think. Consequently it will not surprise you that we took your word when, in the course of discussion with myself and other representatives of the Bridge System, you declined so firmly to have a Bridge to Azrael.

"It should please you that the scoutship *Hunting Dog*, Captain Lucy Inkoos commanding, lifted for space on my orders directly Minister Shrigg finished his final talks with you. By now the ship is orbiting, and will not return to the surface of the planet."

It was like the sun coming out on a dull day. Smiles came to every face except Lancaster

Long's own—and Alida's. She stood quite frozen.

"But—!" Long said after a confused pause.

"For yourself," van Heemskirk said, "what you do is entirely your own affair."

He cocked one eyebrow impudently at Long, turned on his heel, and walked towards the door. Behind him someone started to chuckle; then it was laughter, and everyone was joining in. Again, except Long himself, and Alida.

Under her breath she found herself forming words. She listened, oddly detached. She heard: "But Hans is on Azrael. Could they have made him leave?"

She thrust her way through the throng, to catch van Heemskirk.

"Whose idea do you think it was?" van Heemskirk said. "I wasn't so clever."

"Then where is Hans?" Alida demanded.

For a moment or two longer van Heemskirk seemed to be concentrating on the luxury of his private car. Then he said, "On Azrael."

"You left him there?"

"Part of a kind of duel, if you like." His voice was uncharacteristically edgy. "That was how Hans Demetrios saw it, anyway. He on Azrael; Lancaster Long here. To the victor the spoils."

"If he wins, he loses," Alida said.

"I know," van Heemskirk said with unusual gentleness. "Alida, I realize that most people think of me as a career politician—I am—whose business is to oil the wheels—it is!—and whose interest in life ends there—it does not"

Alida made a vague hopeless gesture.

"The man who oils the wheels, surely, is the man most concerned when someone comes and tries to throw a bucketful of sand into the machine. You've fallen for Hans, haven't you?"

"Is it so obvious?" Alida said dispiritedly.

"Oh, I think so. I see a faint resemblance to Saxena in him. I hope you don't mind people talking of Saxena now. There was a time, I recall, when you found it unbearable."

"He's dead," Alida said.

"Except in your mind, and Jorgen Thorkild's. It's about time he died there too. Oh, I think in Jorgen's mind he is now dying. I've spoken to Lorenzo about this."

He rubbed his plump hands together, round and round, with maddening slowness.

"Somehow," he said, "we've put ourselves in the position of a man who's obsessed by a fear of failure. In that state you can't face someone whose avowed in-

tention is to wreck your handiwork. More subtly, you also cannot face someone who has tried the same work—and failed at it. Not unless you can convince yourself that you're better than he is."

"Are you talking about Jorgen?" Alida said.

"In a sense. Why did Saxena kill himself, Alida? If anyone knows, you should."

"He never told me."

"Perhaps it would help him to die in your mind if you tried to work out why. Let me make another suggestion. Our life is—you could call it in a sense incestuous. Out of all the millions of people on Earth we form a kind of interlocked family group. In succeeding Saxena, Jorgen was called upon to take the place of a quasi-father. His demands on you were Oedipal. Had that struck you?"

FOR some moments she sat silent, her face whitening. Then she said, "It fits, Moses. Thank you. That will help me with Hans, too."

"Oh yes. He asked me to mention it to you. At the same meeting where he told me what to do if all negotiations with Long failed."

"What did he actually say?"

"That our only hope, if Long was adamant, was to make it appear for the benefit of the public

at large that we were in the right and Azrael was behaving in a petty, foolish manner. He told me that he foresaw a partial failure whatever we did: a wave of suicides from boredom, a wave of willful deaths in dangerous pastimes. Like Rungley's snake-handling, on which Long has bestowed the blessing of publicity."

"So he told you to withdraw the ship from Azrael and leave Long here, stranded."

"In the hope of reducing him from a mysterious, awe-inspiring figure, spurning our best achievements on good grounds, to a familiar and rather silly—and ordinary—person. While Hans remains on Azrael. He foresaw everything, including a legalistic argument to satisfy Shrigg."

"Which would be?"

"That he is completing the investigation into the death of Jacob Chen."

"But how about getting him home?"

"It's all planned. The ship has been withdrawn from normal duty; it will stay in the Azrael system till he is killed, or till he calls for it. You faced that better. You're getting things in perspective."

Alida nodded. "Does Jorgen know about his attitude to me?"

"Lorenzo said he did. Unfortunately it was only a symptom of

his disorder, and doesn't touch the heart of the problem." He hesitated. "Which is hardly surprising. Alida, would you say you knew Hans Demetrios very well?"

"No one will ever know him well," she answered.

"Perhaps you're right . . . Did you know he had a streak of mysticism, let me say?"

"I wouldn't have thought so," Alida demurred.

BUT he has. You see, the sickness which Jorgen is suffering—the sickness which he caught from Lancaster Long, and which is beginning to spread—is a very ancient one. We've almost forgotten about it. But Hans knew of it, and told me. I guess you expect a programmer to have *recherché* data like that. Ever hear of *accidia*?"

"Is that the name of a disease?"

"A kind of disease. It used to be called 'the black night of the soul'. It isn't depression. It goes beyond melancholia and misery to a point at which you have to ask the unanswerable question: what's the point of it all? Jorgen is asking that question, by being as he is."

"It sounds to me like one of the problems the medievals used to pose."

"Oh, it is. Hence *accidia* was a sin; it involved a denial of divine

purpose. It was considered one of the inescapable burdens of possessing a soul. A non-rational creature could not have asked the question, and once asked it could not be answered without—in their terms—faith. But with faith, you didn't ask it."

"This is double-talk," Alida said angrily. "Are you trying to tell me that Hans is taking it seriously?"

"What do you think?"

Alida shook her head in bewilderment.

"Now let me tell you something which you will find still worse," van Heemskirk said. "These fur hats which the men of Azrael wear—you've seen them?"

"Of course, you know I have, we all have."

"Have you ever seen Long with out his?"

"No, I haven't!"

"I visited him in the hospital where they took him after the snake-bite affair," van Heemskirk said. "I confirmed this with the doctors, by the way. When his hat is off, and the fringe around the front of the hat does not cover his forehead, you see on each side, just below the hair-line, a little puckered excrescence of hardened skin. The doctor who attended Long said it was almost as hard as a finger-nail. In other words, Alida: Lancaster Long has horns."

XI

IF that one moment in the life of a suicide between the decision and the death could be stretched to days, weeks and years, Hans Demetrios thought, it would become a little like what he was now experiencing. The hung-in-space instant after the chair is kicked away, before the rope constricts the throat; the terrible infinity of falling between the cliff-top and the rocks; the hiss of air escaping irrevocably into space, making its own sound, carrying its own sound to ears that will never hear anything again.

The people were puzzled at first when the scoutship, giving no warning, lifted from the port, leaving only the dwarfed figure of Hans Demetrios standing on the arid concrete like a lone mourner. He felt at that moment curiously divided, between regret at what he was losing and eagerness to know if he was justified in his sacrifice. He compared himself to a man starving to death, who could find no food except a bitter fruit which twisted his mouth as he choked it down to assuage his hunger.

It was a little while before the silent men came to bring him before a local official. They handled him roughly, but he was prepared for that. In a room walled with bare, planed planks

the official demanded to know what had happened.

Hans answered meekly, hiding his true feelings.

"Your representative, Lancaster Long, refused to permit a Bridge on Azrael, and demanded that we leave your world alone. We would not try and force acceptance on you."

"And you?" the official said.

"I stayed to tell you of the decision."

"But what about Long?" the official pressed him. Hans gave a measured shrug.

"What he does is of no concern to us," he answered. "He is still on Earth, I presume. Certainly he did not come back by way of the ship's Bridge."

The official uttered barking orders, and the guards took Hans to a cell. Squatting on the hard floor, his back into a corner to find what support he could, Hans reviewed in imagination what must be happening outside.

The exact status of Lancaster Long, which conferred on him the power to speak for Azrael in negotiating with Earth, was one of the things that even Jacob Chen had not been able to establish. Ipewell had been far simpler; there was the quasi-religious foundation of the matriarchy, the legend of the Greatest Mother of All whose personification was Uskia in this generation, a whole interlocking

society to which the key was readily available.

But on Azrael . . .

It was clear that there was a kind of caste system. If you could compare it with anything, perhaps the structure of ancient Japanese society was an analogy. More than pedigree, what counted in the highest caste of all was a code of behavior. You could not push the comparison, but as a sketch it served.

For that code suggestions of a key could be found in certain legendary acts. In classical Greece, they said, an artist who had created a master-work would flaw it deliberately, for fears its very perfection might excite the jealousy of the gods. Also, in many cultures, men had taken their most prized possessions and burned them on altars as a sacrifice. Even to an only son.

Even to life itself.

BUT Captain Inkoos and the others who had come in the ship *Hunting Dog* had no knowledge of divine jealousy or sacrifices. The fact of existence made its own demands on them, which they were satisfied to fulfill. They landed, after broadcasting the usual warnings. They spoke with officials like the man who had just questioned Hans himself. It was not their business to interfere in the affairs of this newly contacted planet, but only to

make their offer of a Bridge and then to find out what they could about the society here so that when Azrael was linked into the rest of the System there would be no friction.

By the time Captain Inkoos's staff programmer had found the work too much for him, so that Jacob Chen had to be sent for, the close-mouthed natives had selected Long as their delegate, and chosen those who were to go with him to Earth, and they were already being received by Moses van Heemskirk on behalf of the people of the mother world.

Hans sat in the corner of the chilly cell and thought of the rumors that might be expected to start. Whoever Lancaster Long might be, he was important on Azrael, and trusted. Why else would he have been selected? And now that the scoutship had gone, there was only one person who could say what had become of him.

He had refused the Bridge. So far, so good.

Why had he not come home? Because he had betrayed his code and did not dare let the fact be known on Azrael? Because, for all his outward scoffing at the ways of Earth, he had been tempted by them? Let those questions once be asked, and there would be hellish results.

"Why did Long not come back before the ship went away? He;

and those who were with him?"

This was more than a local official; he was a man almost as tall as Long, with the same cast of features and the same piercing gaze. They had taken Hans to see him in a huge hall of rough-dressed stone, seated on a tall wooden chair. Four secretaries attended him, and several other aides stood by.

"He could doubtless have come back at any time he wishes," Hans shrugged. "But as you must know, in discussions with those in charge of the Bridge System he refused to permit a Bridge on Azrael. When he made the refusal final, we withdrew the ship."

The man in the tall chair conferred behind his hand with one of his aides. Hans could see that what he had said was being confirmed. Why not? Day-by-day accounts of the negotiations with van Heemskirk had been passed back to Azrael by the ship's Bridge.

"Why were you left here?" the man on the chair said.

"To conduct an investigation into the death of Jacob Chen," Hans answered.

"What needs to be investigated there?"

"Some men," Hans said deliberately—here he had to be very cautious—"would say that the urge to destroy springs from small jealousy. Wanton killing is

like the act of a child who breaks a plaything belonging to another child, for no better reason than that it is not his own. If you have on Azrael no one whose life is of any value, then perhaps you do not suffer by this habit."

Behind the tall chair one of the aides moved to whisper in the ear of the man seated. Hans saw that he was elderly, with a grizzled grey beard; his thin lips were set in a smile. Some intuition told him that this was one of the men he had been looking for. More than the man on the chair, he counted.

The man on the chair grunted some word of permission, and the man with the grey beard stepped forward. He said, "I am Casimir Yard. You touch on philosophical matters, like the child you refer to—without understanding."

Hans gave him a steady look. He said, "Age does not always bring wisdom."

"On your world men grow old without wisdom. Which accounts for your being able to believe what you say." Yard's thin lips twisted a little further, so that the smile became a sneer.

"As you will," Hans said indifferently. "Nonetheless Jacob Chen was a man of very great wisdom as we regard wisdom, and his death was simple waste. We treat men as they would wish to be treated. Perhaps Lancaster

Long discovered this—I was not in his confidence when he made his decision."

Another turn of the knife of suspicion.

Yard felt it, and hesitated. Then he said, "All men die. The agent is immaterial."

"Yet when a man has killed, you execute him."

"True." Yard paused a moment. "Ah, I see what you would imply. It is to be presumed that the wish of one who kills in ritual is for death. To execute him is not to exact payment, but to grant the wish."

"This system may be apposite on Azrael," Hans allowed magnanimously. "Where your people are of such little account that their deaths can occur at random and cause no ill effects."

"Your rudeness is only excused by your ignorance," Yard snapped.

"What else am I to think?" Hans countered. "If you had men who are valuable to you, how could you permit their wanton killing? Or do you confer beforehand, and set aside those you can spare, and brand them for slaughter?"

"Enough!" the man on the chair barked. "Clearly things are as Long reported, where you hail from. You are a witold, and we are well rid of interference by your people."

"Lancaster Long," Hans said

delicately, "has not come home."

YARD exchanged a glance with the man on the chair. All the other people in the hall had sunk in Hans's mind to mere shadows; they did not matter.

"Let me state clearly what the facts are," he said loudly. "Either your view held on Azrael is wrong, and mine is right, in which case your delegate's decision to decline the Bridge was due to a small-minded unwillingness to confess the truth—"

A sudden shout went up around him, angry and threatening. He paused clamly until it died away, then continued.

"Or my view is wrong, and yours is right. In which case—and I quote!" He bowed ironically to Casimir Yard. "In which case, we are to take it that your wish is for death."

In dead silence, Yard seemed to begin to understand. Hans went on, for the benefit of those whose minds worked slowly.

"We too can kill," he said. "By any of a hundred different methods, we can kill you."

And there it was. The same dilemma which had impaled himself, translated into terms that spiked an entire planet. It was not for the people of Azrael to know that the threat was not a threat.

Are we wrong? Then we have lived a lie, and our existence is

mere foolishness, our attempts to bring reality into our lives by confronting ourselves with death are childish nonsense.

Are we right? Then we have given those, out there, more powerful than ourselves, the justification for putting an end to us as some among us have put an end to one of them.

Hans looked at the face of Casimir Yard. It had gone almost as grey as his beard. The man on the chair was likewise pale, and there was a grumbling of worry among the others listening in the hall.

This was revenge, perhaps. Not against the people of Azrael as such. Against the universe which had so cruelly defined his own predicament.

Assumption: that the people of Azrael are dedicated to what the ancients called the powers of darkness.

Am I right? Then by the act of refusing the Bridge, Lancaster Long is able to call in question what has become the main-spring of life for the people of Earth, to shake the minds of everyone who depends on it until cracks appear like cracks in the walls of buildings during an earthquake.

Am I wrong? But to be wrong, for a programmer, is to be dead.

No one had found words to answer him when he spoke again.

"The ship did not leave this

system when it took off," he said, "It is standing by in orbit. It waits for me. I can—and must—report to it at regular intervals. As I said, I am here to investigate the death of Jacob Chen. Were you to hinder my investigation, it would be possible for that ship to call others. Hundreds of others. It would be possible for such ships to make this whole planet a desert."

With a certain grim humor, he added, "As a matter of fact, that ship alone could do the job. But it would take rather a long time."

Yard turned slowly to face the man on the tall chair. He said, "It is as he says. We must conduct this investigation—not into the death of the Earthman only, but into . . ."

His voice tailed away, as though the formulation of the whole thought was too much for him.

"Into your own stupidity," Hans said coldly. "And now, if we have done with this logic-chopping for the moment, I must make my first report to the orbiting ship."

XII

IF it had not been for one thing, Jorgen Thorkild would have been content to sit away his days in the pleasant garden, among the flowered bushes and the lily-ponds. He wanted to. For some time, he managed to.

But there was this hammering echo in his mind, striking responses from memories he could not deliberately forget, to remind him that Azrael had refused the Bridge.

Knowledge of the likely consequences of that decision kept coming between him and the books he tired to read, the recordings which he tried to lose himself in. He was aware that there was a world outside, and that breached his defense hopelessly.

He had not raised the subject with Lorenzo again; so far he could preserve his pose of total indifference. But a pose it had become. He thought this must be what men called conscience—irrational.

As a child he had had some musical ability. He obtained a small harmonium from the hospital stores and sat by his favorite pond playing from memory or improvising. Sometimes the other patients came and listened, sitting around him on the grass.

Today there were none, for a very long time, and he played to himself for more than an hour. At last his hands were growing stiff, and he let them lapse into a sort of slow lament, feeling after each note without conscious direction.

Suddenly he hit a raucous polychord and slammed the lid of the keyboard shut. No, it was no

use any more! He could not escape from knowledge in his own mind. Long had spurned the offer of the Bridge, as he had dismissed Thorkild. An act so contrary to the ordinary run suggested a sort of purpose. It might not be a valid one—but it was a purpose, and that was what he lacked.

He would have to go back.

As the decision crystallized, he looked up. He did not at first recognize the girl facing him, for she was clothed and he had never seen her clothed before. Then he realized.

"Nefret!" he said.

She stood with her hands folded demurely in front of her. Her long dark hair was knotted on her nape. Her face was calm. But out of her eyes looked something pathetic—like the spirit of a caged wild beast.

She said nothing in the next few seconds, and he went on, "Are you leaving? Are you cured?"

"Yes, they cured me," she said. She turned a chair standing nearby so that it faced him at the instrument, and sat down. "I am allowed to go away today."

"What are you going to do?"

He had put the question for politeness. The answer came with such terrible directness that it lashed his dormant mind awake.

"I shall kill myself," Nefret said.

He stared at her. Her face became that of Saxena, for a moment as in life, then twisted by the corrosive poison which had given him release. And then the Saxena-face, as so often before in nightmare, became his own.

THE illusion passed, leaving him shivering although the sun and air were warm. "But why?" he heard himself cry.

"Because it's the only way to stop the world." She plucked at the hem of her unaccustomed shirt, which she wore uncomfortably, like a splint. "Do you remember that I once came out and talked to you here? I said I thought I was soft, like clay, and you were hard, and they would break you before they changed you. I've been watching you, listening to your music. I know now that I was wrong."

"How? Why?"

"You're being gnawed at from within. You fidget without cause. You lapse suddenly into silence and stare at nothing. One day soon you're going to give in, and you'll go back to where you were, and you'll stay there, and you won't be able to remember why you left. I thought you were hard. No one is hard. So I have let them shape me the way they want, and when I die it won't be me I've killed, but this stranger."

She made an unhappy gesture up and down her body.

"We are all strangers to ourselves," Thorkild said after a long silence. "Nefret—why did they bring you here?"

"Because of what I wanted. Because I didn't want what I was offered."

"What did you want, then?"

She gave him a curious look. "You know, it's strange!" she said. "I have the feeling that I know you so well—and yet I know nothing about you except your name, and you know nothing about me. It's all very simple. I'm uncontracted. My father was on the Earthside staff from Glory, and my mother refused to join him when he left, and the contract was dissolved and my legal guardian is a man in an office in a big government building."

"Still?" Thorkild said.

"For two more years."

"And the first time he had you sent here?"

"Oh, it's not a *he* that does it!" She gave a bitter laugh. "It's a *they*. I could fight one person. But the huge imponderable shadowy force behind him—you can't escape that. I tried. The first time I ran off with a spaceman to Indonesia. I tried to explain why I did it, because I knew it was silly—though it was fun for a while—but they'd made up their minds beforehand that I was crazy and they sent me here. And the second time I think

I was crazy. But this time it was because I tried to go by Bridge."

"I remember!" Thorkild said. "That was—the day Saxena died!"

"That was why I tried it then. I thought maybe there would be some confusion. But they caught me and sent me here again."

Thorkild was silent for a long time, thinking over the case as he had seen it from the impersonal heights of top administrative level. He remembered looking down from the vantage platform before Long and Uskia and van Heemskirk arrived.

He had wondered then what became of human importance down there, two hundred feet below. Well, he had his answer. But whether it was any use he couldn't tell.

"What do you really want, Nefret?" he said.

"To stop," she answered. "To be turned off. That's all I have left that I can want. There's no reason to do anything else."

"I don't mean that. I mean—well, assuming it became possible for you to do what you liked, without having to die. What would you do? Go to Glory?"

"I wasn't trying to get to my father," she said wearily. "They kept trying to tell me that I was, because it was a tidy capsule explanation and helped to justify what they did to frustrate me. What's my father to me? A bi-

ological accident! I wouldn't know him if I met him!"

"Stop listing what you don't want," Thorkild said. "Tell me something you do want."

THE girl looked at him with puzzled eyes. She was silent for several seconds. Finally she said in an altered voice, "I guess if I want anything, I want—anything that will matter."

"That's it," Thorkild said. "That's the right desire."

There was a footfall on gravel behind his chair, and he turned to see Lorenzo approaching. The doctor's eyes were as usual narrowed against the sunlight. He nodded to Thorkild, but addressed himself to Nefret.

"They're waiting for you at the entrance," he said. "You can go now."

Obediently, like a puppet, Nefret got to her feet. As she moved, however, Thorkild gestured at her to wait. He raised his eyes to Lorenzo's face.

"I don't seem to have seen you so often these past few days, doctor," he said.

"Why should you?" Lorenzo answered cuttingly. "I've been busy. In case you didn't notice, there's been a rush of new patients—people who've had the foundations of their lives questioned and who haven't got your advantages which would let them help themselves."

"A consequence of Azrael's refusal to splice into the Bridge System?"

"Of course. We knew this was coming. You aren't unique, you know."

Standing in front of her chair, Nefret waited passively. Thorkild indicated her. He said, "You told her that 'they' were waiting to take her away. Who are 'they'?"

"I don't know," Lorenzo said irritably. "Somebody sent by her legal guardian."

"Tell *them* to go away," Thorkild said. He got to his feet. "I've just made an interesting discovery. I'm one of *them*, and I'm ashamed of myself."

Lorenzo began to smile. He said, "Go on. I don't quite see—"

"*They* committed Nefret in your care, didn't they? She was caught trying to get off Earth by Bridge, the day Saxena killed himself. I was his deputy then—I was the owner of an arm that stamped the official seal on an order for her arrest. I didn't take the slightest personal interest in the case; I'd already gone too far towards dehumanization. As I recall the law in this respect, since she was committed for this particular offense, her guardian was acting legally as an agent for the Bridge City authorities—for me, in other words, in my capacity as Saxena's successor. Nefret is my legal ward."

Lorenzo's smile was turning into a grin. Bewildered, the girl looked from one to the other of the two men.

"Is this true?" she asked.

"I imagine so," Lorenzo confirmed. "In which case—what do you propose to do, Thorkild?"

"I'm going to exercise my legal rights," Thorkild said, getting to his feet. "You haven't officially discharged Nefret, have you?"

"No—I have to discharge her into the care of a fit person, as the jargon goes."

"Then I'm your fit person," Thorkild said briskly. "I'm going to try and provide Nefret with what she wants—a simple enough thing, you'd imagine, because all she wants is anything that matters. I can't think of anything I want more than that. Maybe we can help each other find it."

"Purely out of curiosity," Lorenzo said slowly, "what are your present feelings towards Lancaster Long?"

"That lout!" Thorkild said, and after a moment laughed. "It finally broke through to me how he'd insulted me—he and his whole damned planet!—by calling the work I've devoted my life to a piece of foolishness. It isn't. I'm not that stupid. I can't think of any way to prove it to him except by beating him over the head, but I will. I swear, I will."

I REMEMBER telling you that so long as you could still be angry, you weren't past hope," Lorenzo said. "All it took was finding a rational object for your anger. You've got one, and provided you can stay angry for a while, you'll have no more trouble."

Nefret had not been following the last exchanges with much comprehension; now she broke in. "Does this mean that Jorgen is going to be my guardian—somebody I actually know, instead of that . . . b-bureaucrat who's plagued me for so long?"

"That's the idea," Thorkild said, nodding. "Like it?"

"It sounds like a major improvement," Nefret said with misplaced dignity. "Thank you, Jorgen."

"Thank you," Thorkild echoed. "Doctor, get me some transport, will you? Notify my office that I'm coming in—have a digest of current problems ready for me—and you might be kind enough to call my home and activate the servos against my arrival this evening."

"It's a pleasure," Lorenzo said. "But I don't know what the man will say who's been waiting so long to collect Nefret."

* * *

On the way back from the hospital to the Bridge City, Thorkild said very little. His mind was preoccupied by the problem he

had mentioned to Lorenzo: how to show Lancaster Long that he and his whole planetful of people were wrong in their view of the universe.

But—after all, were they? Didn't he at least owe them a debt of gratitude for reminding him that life wasn't just a series of mechanical responses to stimuli, but something into which the human mind was capable of creating subjective, but nonetheless real, significance? Lancaster Long had done that if nothing else—just by an act of refusal.

He set his jaw grimly. He was going to get Azrael tied into the Bridge System. Somehow. Some day. And *damn* Lancaster Long.

Having been badly out of touch with the news during his stay in hospital, he stopped the car on the way into the city at a public newsfax and bought a copy of the current sheet. He got back into the car before spreading it out and looking at the headings. He got no further, for his head began to spin and his mind reeled. Across the newsfax the words were blazoned:

AZRAEL ACCEPTS BRIDGE.

XIII

HANS had been correct in his early assumption that Casimir Yard was a man who mattered, more than anyone else he had encountered in the days fol-

lowing his own arrival on Azrael and the departure of the starship for orbit. Yard was one of a select clique of philosopher-priests who provide the intellectual impetus for the pain-cult around which the society of the planet focused. The emotional aspect required no outside impetus—on a dismal planet like this, such a cult did little more than objectify natural feelings of depression and despair. It offered an infallible means for the individual to make his existence significant, and hence was ultimately satisfying.

But Yard was not alone on a strange world; he did not have to maintain his logic and determination despite intolerable weariness, against subtle attack from a dozen sides. There were others, equally intelligent, equally well trained in the strange casuistry of the cult. Hans thought sometimes of the ancient philosophical dictum that "solipsism is the only ultimately defensible philosophical standpoint," and added a rider to it: the objective futility of existence could be defended pretty well, too.

But he had his own impregnable advantage. He was a cleft stick, and the men of Azrael knew it. He was a dilemma, and they were between his horns. The fact brought him a warm comfortable reassurance when his defenses were at their lowest.

What he was saying over and over to those who argued with him could be reduced to plain alternatives. Either the men of Azrael were wrong (and here the example of Lancaster Long was useful), in which case they were behaving ridiculously to refuse the Bridge, or they were right, in which case Earth and the Bridge worlds were entitled to avenge the futile killing of Jacob Chen, on any scale they wished.

"Chen did not matter to you," Hans said over and over. "He mattered to us. You say that a killing is the expression of a wish to be killed, which you then fulfill. You must then accept the right of Earth to kill your planet. If you deny this right you deny your premises and—and you are fools."

They countered him. Some of them were bearded, like Casimir Yard; some were saturnine, like Lancaster Long; some were aggressive and some thoughtful, some emotional and some cold. There seemed to be no end to them.

He waited patiently, and when he could he took time to consider his own dilemma. He believed that these people believed what they said. If they didn't, and finally yielded to the offer of the Bridge, unable to endure their own logic when applied to their whole world, he would have been wrong, and for him this too would be disastrous.

But if he were right, he would have to order the destruction of the planet, and Earth would never do this thing. He had to act a lie in order to kill himself by proving himself wrong—for the sake of others.

He dared not look to the moment when he would have to resolve that problem. Let it happen.

THE day came, finally. He was summoned from the cell where he had been confined since his first encounter with Casimir Yard, to the same hall where the encounter had taken place. This time he recognized among those present all the sages who had fought with words against him, and sensed from their attitudes that the decision had been taken. There was no pretense this time—it was Yard, advancing to a point beside the tall wooden chair, who spoke to him.

"It is our decision," Yard said slowly, his mouth contorting as though every word was painful, "that we must consent to your crude blackmail and accept the imposition of this Bridge."

Wrong then. Hans felt his mind swirl in his skull, but he kept his voice calm somehow, trying to think of all the people who had made the Bridge system their justification for living—Alida, Jorgen Thorkild, everyone else—as he said, "And the condition attached?"

Yard nodded, and then spat forcefully on the floor. The others present looked as though they would have copied him, but did not.

"Report this to the starship," Yard said. "You will be taken to the spaceport at once, and presumably the ship will come down to fetch you. I hope very much that I never see you again."

After that, things happened to Hans in a blur—being escorted to the spaceport, standing in a grey drizzle watching the ship come down, thinking indistinctly of the emptiness of his life now that he had proved himself wrong . . . until the ship grounded, and the ramps slid down to make a pathway to the lock. Urged by his guards, he stumbled forward up the slippery metal steps, and into the opening airlock.

There were two women waiting for him. He had expected Captain Inkoos, of course, but he had not anticipated the presence of Alida Marquis. Taken aback, he knew he had to say something.

"I—" he began, and had to moisten his lips. "I was wrong," he said finally.

A look of horror crossed Alida's face, wiping off the expression of glad greeting like writing on a slate when the sponge passes over it. She said, "They—refused the Bridge, again?"

Bewildered, Hans shook his

head. "No—no, I was sure they could not yield, that they were dedicated to what used to be called the powers of darkness, and—"

"They are, they are!" Alida cut in. "Did they not tell you what changed their minds for them? No, of course they would not—they're evil creatures, and that would give them a certain pleasure. So long as they thought you didn't mean what you said, they would be able to cling to their beliefs. We saw it with Lancaster Long, didn't we?"

"Did we?" Hans said wonderingly.

"You pointed it out yourself—that Long could let himself be bitten on the arm because he didn't know whether he was immune or not. But if he'd known, really known, in the guts, from past experience, that he wasn't immune, he wouldn't have done it. If he'd desired to die, he would have expressed the desire by killing someone else. That's his pattern. He *didn't* want to die, logically."

"I had all this," Hans said. "I was still wrong. What was it that persuaded the people of Azrael to accept the Bridge?"

"You haven't yet told him, Alida," Captain Inkoos said, standing apart in the airlock with her arms crossed on her breast. "It was a megaton torpedo exploded in their northern

ocean. It convinced them that you meant what you said."

"I—I still don't see—" Hans put his hand to his face, as though by touching his forehead he could still the whirling of his brain. "I ought to have thought of that—but it wasn't *like* that at all!"

"Of course," Alida whispered suddenly, and the expression of dismay faded from her face. "You didn't know! Hans, you *weren't* wrong—you must accept that! You weren't wrong, but you didn't have a crucial piece of data. Did you know that Lancaster Long has horns?"

THERE was a long, trembling silence. Eventually Hans shook his head, and a hesitant smile crept on to his face.

"Spell it out as you see it now," Captain Inkoos said, with a glance at Alida. "Make sure we know that you know."

"Horns," Hans said wonderingly. "If I'd known that . . . I *wish* I'd known, for it would have spared me so many hours of mental torture! They're not natural, are they?"

"No." Alida took a deep breath. "They're artificial excrescences, hardened by the repeated application of some skin irritant and probably teased up by hand. They're about half an inch long, about as hard as a corn on the foot. You never saw them be-

cause they're usually hidden by the fringe of his fur hat. I didn't know about them, but Moses van Heemskirk saw them when Long was hospitalized, and told me, and I realized this was information you lacked."

"Artificial horns," Hans said, the smile spreading. "They never took themselves seriously—they knew they were cheating themselves all the time."

He pounded his fist into his palm. "Liars! Cheats! And I thought they were—oh, never mind what I thought, because I was right on the basis of what I knew. And you sent down a megaton torpedo, and they were shown something to which they knew they weren't immune. This set up a conflict between their shame, at being reluctant to face the extermination which the logic of their stand demanded, and their recognition that the extermination would serve nobody's purpose, not even their own." He started to chuckle. "If it had been a question of planet-for-planet, they wouldn't have been able to object—if they'd had the techniques to reduce Earth to a cinder rather than accept the imposition of the Bridge, they'd have done it. But this peculiar Earthly logic, which regarded Jacob Chen's death as a reason to kill the planet which killed him because he was a unique, irreplaceable individual—this was

beyond their comprehension. Alida, do you realize you've saved my life?"

"Yes," Alida said. "I hope very much that you can be grateful. Do you know how?"

XIV

SINGING, Alida entered her office—and stopped dead in her tracks. Her hand flew to her throat, as though to encourage the words which would not otherwise come.

"Jorgen!" she said faintly. "I—I didn't expect to find you here. How—?"

"I'm the Director of the Bridge System, remember?" Thorkild said. "All the doors in the Bridge City open for me."

He sat in a chair with sheets of newsfax spread over his knees—every one issued for the past several hours, by the thickness of the pile. And he had not come into the room alone. On another chair, behind him and to one side, was a slender girl, very young, with her hair knotted on the nape of her neck and wide, frightened eyes.

"This is Nefret," Thorkild said as an afterthought, gesturing at the girl. "She was in the hospital with me. She was the one who tried to escape from Earth the day Saxena killed himself—do you remember?"

Alida had recovered herself

quickly enough to avoid showing a reaction to that probe. She walked forward steadily to take her place at her desk.

"I remember," she said lightly. "Well, Jorgen! I'm very glad to know you're better. I'm sorry if I seemed startled—it was just the fact of finding you here, of all places. I'm really delighted."

"You're in a fair way to putting me back where I came from," Thorkild said stonily. He tapped the newsfax sheets on his knees. "I came back from my—my state of depression, if you want a printable name for it, with the life-sustaining intention of beating Lancaster Long over the head till he agreed to tie Azrael into the Bridge System. And on the way to the city I saw that Azrael had changed its collective mind. I damned nearly turned right around and went back."

"Why?"

"Because it took the—the insult of Azrael refusing what I offered to make me sufficiently angry to want to come out of the hospital."

There was a faint sound from the girl in the other chair—almost a moan. Thorkild glanced at her and then back to Alida.

"Why I didn't," he said, "was because of Nefret. We have too much in common. So I made some inquiries, and found that just before the news came through you'd gone to the *Hunt-*

ing Dog, in orbit around Azrael, with data you thought Hans Demetrios ought to hear, and—"

"Are you jealous of Hans, Jorgen?" Alida cut in. For a long moment he stared at her.

"I guess maybe I am," he said finally. "The way I used to be jealous of Saxena. It's a hang-over from past things."

Deliberately echoing Captain Inkoo's a short time before, Alida said, "Spell it out for us. Go on."

"I don't have any reason to be jealous of Hans Demetrios," Thorkild said, sounding faintly surprised. "Not now. Anyone who got more attention from you than I did used to be a sort of Saxena in my mind, because you weren't a person to me, but the mistress of the former Director, the man whose standards I had to match. Damn it, he failed to match his standards, himself! I'm going to do better than that!"

"You're already doing better," Alida said with a smile.

"Alida," Thorkild said, "why did Saxena kill himself?"

There was a pause. Alida's face became drawn, and when she spoke, her voice was husky. She said, "He never told me. It took something that Moses said to show me the real reason."

"And that was?" Hungrily, Thorkild leaned forward on his chair.

"He was too small a man for

his responsibilities," Alida said deliberately. "Now I know that, I know why I've fallen for Hans—oh, I'm not trying to hide it. It's because he was willing to take on the job that killed Jacob Chen, knowing he might kill himself by doing so. For a reason, not out of inadequacy."

"You wasted yourself on Saxena," Thorkild said.

"Of course I did. But I didn't realize until he was dead. And then I didn't want to admit it—just as you didn't want to admit to the need to prove that Lancaster Long was wrong."

"For different reasons?"

"Yes."

"Fair enough." Thorkild got to his feet, rolling the newsfax sheets, and slid them into the mouth of the disposer.

"Are you going?" Alida said, surprised. "Don't you want to hear about the reason for Azrael changing over and deciding to splice in to the System?"

I've no doubt it will be on my desk in the form of an accurate digest," Thorkild said savagely. "I won't be around to bother you for a while, Alida. If I come back, it'll be when I . . ." His voice trailed away.

She looked at him for some seconds. An expression blended of curiosity and interest came to her lovely face. At last she said, "Yes—yes, come back, Jorgen. I'm as much of a fool as you, but

not so much that I don't know what programmers are like. All I can hope to do for Hans Demetrios is to give him a little extra of what's ordinary-human before he takes off for the intellectual stratosphere where Jacob Chen used to live. I'm not the first, but I'll likely be the last—and that's a compliment."

With sudden irrelevance, she added in a whisper, "The higher the fewer."

"What was that?"

"Nothing."

WHEN he came out of the office into the corridor, Thorkild stood for a moment, breathing deeply, while Nefret's puzzled eyes studied him.

It hadn't happened as he'd expected. He'd been meaning to say what he felt about her forestalling his wish to show Long what a fool he was—and how about Long, anyway? But in the event, it had seemed too petty a thing to revile her, and here he was, with . . . what? A job to do, loose ends to tie up, a life to live. For its own sake, to make the best of it, to approximate as nearly as possible to his ambitions.

What it came down to, maybe, was that it had taken Azrael's refusal to join the Bridge System to make him wonder why he did what he did—and Azrael's agreement to join the System had

shown him what he was, in some sense at least, not utterly wrong. Could anyone ask more?

He smiled at the newest of his responsibilities. "Sorry to have troubles," he said.

A faraway look came to her young face. She said, I like you to do it. They're—different problems from mine, you see. And"—she made a sweeping gesture that indicated the whole of the Bridge City surrounding them—"I never had anything like this, anything big and important, to be involved in."

"Why, you little darling," Thorkild said, and put his arms around her and kissed her hard on the mouth. It was a long time before she slid her lips aside, wet on his cheek, and whispered, "I was wondering when you'd stop treating me like a child."

"Big and important," Thorkild said. "I don't know why it follows—but if you say so, it does. Now: what am I going to do with you? I could give you, here and now, authority to leave Earth for anywhere in the System. You have forty planets to choose from; if you wait a while, you'll have two more, but I don't recommend either Ipewell or Azrael. No, wait—why make up your mind on the spur of the moment? I can show you the worlds that are accepting colonists and sending back problems. Mad snake-handlers are the current

fashion, I see from the newsfax—from Riger's World. We shall go and visit the Earthside representative of Riger's, and he will tell you about them, personally."

He put his arm around her shoulders and swept her laughing along corridors and so to the Riger's World level of the huge main building. He felt light-headed—almost delirious. He felt wonderful. The door named after KORIOT ANGOSS loomed before him, and he put his hand to it and it opened.

ANGOSS swung around. He was bending over a package on his desk—a sort of small cage, apparently—and the girl Maida Wenge was beside him. In the cage there was movement. A pet animal, Thorkild thought, and gave a wild shout.

"Angoss, damn you! Shall I never find you at work? What have you there—something to remind you of the fauna at home?"

Angoss stared at him. "I heard you were coming back," he said after a pause. "I have something here that ought to make you very pleased. Here!"

He lifted the package, letting the wrappings fall, and held it out. Thorkild saw that the moving thing inside the cage was a snake, and all at once he was calm.

He said, "The preacher Rung-

ley is still giving trouble, isn't he? I've been—out of touch."

"As of now, yes, he is," said Angoss judiciously. "But not as of tomorrow, I can promise you. This snake here is poisonous in a big, big way. A present against your return, sort of. I had our chemists on Riger's develop an additive for snake venom which attacks this enzyme that protects Rungley. Any other snake he can ignore, but not this one. This one will make him very sick, I tell you. Are you pleased?"

For an eternal moment Thorkild felt time stand still. A light seemed to dawn on him bright as the sun.

Insoluble problem: a snake-handler immune to venom, whom you need to make move over. Answer: give him a doctored snake he isn't immune to.

Insoluble problem: a planet full of people who reject your most attractive overtures. Answer: make an overture so nasty the others will seem attractive by comparison.

Insoluble problem: lack of incentive to go on living. Answer: impossibility of finding an incentive not to go on living. It

figured. In a cockeyed, round-about, upside-down way, it figured.

"Human beings aren't very logical creatures, are they?" he said aloud.

Angoss blinked. "Never have been," he said. "Not to my knowledge. Leave that to computers, I say. I got better things to do with my time."

"Yes," Thorkild nodded. "Yes, I think I have, too. Let me know when Rungley is due to get his hands on that snake, will you? I'd like to see his face when he catches on."

Nefret, who had been staring fascinated at the little creature writhing in its cage, glanced up. She said, "What are you going to do with it?"

"Permit it to be true to its nature," Thorkild said. "In order to straighten out a man who isn't being true to his. Which is about as much as any snake in history has done."

"The Garden of Eden?" said Angoss in a doubtful voice. "There was one there, they told me."

"It didn't do any more," Thorkild said.

THE END



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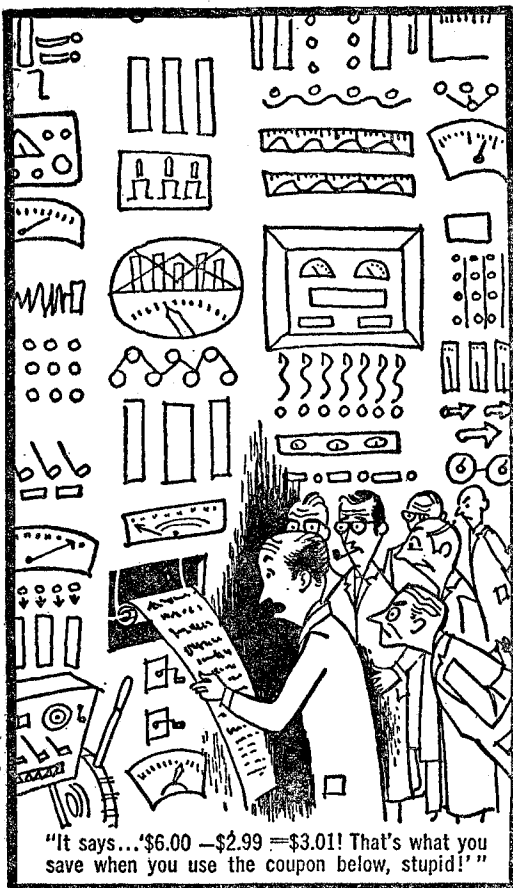
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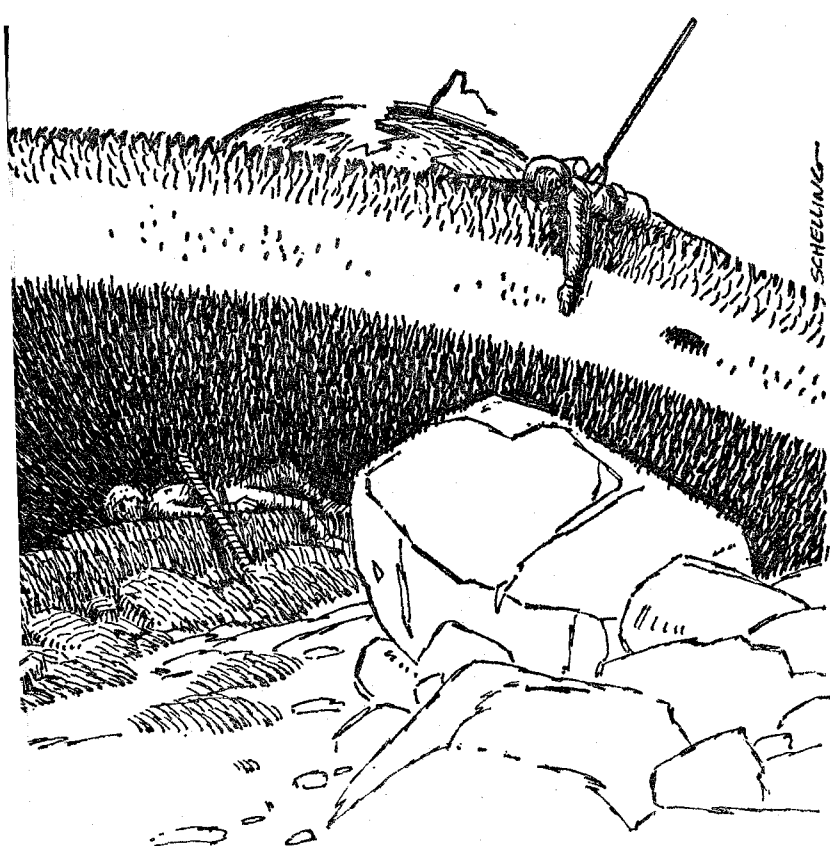


BESIDE THE GOLDEN DOOR

By HENRY SLESAR

Illustrated by SCHELLING

80



Earth was dead, but Liberty still held her torch aloft. Yet only Deez, the alien, could know whether it was raised in welcome or in mockery.

DEVIA'S voice, like a sweetly tinkling bell in his ear, sounded in Ky-Tann's headpiece, and he chuckled at the urgency of her tone. Wedded less than two years, he still delighted in every nuance of her nature, and this was one of them. She could sound equally urgent about an impending hurricane or an imminent dinner party.

With a sigh, he switched off the electron microscope and touched his Answer button lightly. "Yes, my darling? What is it?"

"Haven't you *heard*? It's been on every newsray for the past six hours. I thought you'd have called me by now—"

"I never use the newsray during duty hours," he said patiently. "I prefer not to be interrupted." Ky-Tann was a metals stress analyst at the Roa-Pitin Spaceworks.

Devia missed or ignored the implied criticism. "I'm sure you would have wanted to hear this. Your friend Deez just returned from that exploration of his. He came back a hero, too."

"Deez?" Ky-Tann said; shouted in fact. "Deez back? Devia, are you sure you heard it right?"

"Of course I did. And Deez himself called, not more than five minutes ago. He said the Administrators had him and his crew quarantined for the moment, but he plans to break loose tonight. If he can manage it, he'll be here before the second sunset. Isn't it wonderful?"

"It's wonderful, all right. Only where was he? What did he do that made him such a hero?"

"I couldn't gather too much from the newsray, except that he found a world somewhere that has the Archeological Commission excited as children—"

"You mean an *inhabited* world?" Ky-Tann said skeptically.

"Once inhabited, anyway. Please don't ask me to explain it, Ky, ask newsray or Deez himself, you know how stupid I am about such things."

HE chuckled, and said something loving in their private code, and switched off. His curiosity about Deez' discovery rivaled his excitement about seeing his friend again; in a hundred years of exploration, the space vessels of Illyri had merely confirmed the ancient belief that Life was a rare and precious gift. They had found slugs and lichen and moss on rocky, almost-airless worlds; they had seen wild plant growth in steaming alien jungles; the sea creatures of the Planet Vosa, despite their infinite variety, proved utterly lacking in intelligence. Once, on an unnamed world in the Acheos galaxy, the great space pioneer Val-Rion unearthed the artifacts of a dead civilization and stunned the people of Illyri by his announcement. He claimed to have found written language, works of art, implements and weapons. Val-Rion was a brave man and a mighty adventurer, but a poor scholar. In the time it took Illyri's double suns to rise and set, the Archeological Commission

completed a study of his findings and declared it a not-too-clever hoax, perpetrated by students of the University of Space Sciences. To the end of his days, even after some of the students came forward to admit their deception, Val-Rion persisted in his belief that the finding was authentic, and squandered his fortune in an attempt to interpret the mysterious language. He failed, of course; the "language" was nonsense. Some of the students had been sensitive enough to regret their hoax; one of them, Deez-Cor, named his ship after the late explorer.

But now the *Val-Rion* and her crew were home, after an odyssey so long overdue that the Space Commission had officially declared the expedition lost.

Ky-Tann had never mourned for his missing friend. Sense told him that the *Val-Rion* was gone, atomized by its own engines, shriveled by some alien sun or demolished on the terrain of some unfriendly world. But he refused to make the admission, even after official hope was gone; he continued to envision Deez at the controls of his ship, grinning cockily into space, eyes challenging the void.

He left the spaceworks early and flew his Sked home at just above the legal airspeed. If he had expected to find his wife excited by the prospect of Deez'

visit, he was mistaken. Su-Tann had a new tooth, and Devia was more elated by the sight of the little white stump in the baby's mouth than she could be by all the extra-illyrian worlds in the known galaxies. But when Deez arrived as promised, right after the second sunset, she burst into tears at the sight of him.

Ky-Tann himself swallowed hard as he embraced his friend. Deez was gaunt inside his space-man's coveralls, the bones in his face pronounced. The skin of his right cheek and neck had been burned, and the hair whitened on that side, giving him a strangely off-balance look. He grinned as Deez always grinned, but when he stopped grinning his eyes were weary.

"You must rest, Deez," Devia said sorrowfully. "It must have been awful for you."

"No," Deez answered. "I want to talk, Devia, I can't tell you how much I've wanted to see you both, to tell you about it."

Ky-Tann said: "The Administrators must have given you a rough time."

"I've turned over all our film records to them, and the artifacts we stored aboard. But I haven't really talked to anyone." He licked his dry lips, and brushed a hand over the whitened side of his hair. "The baby," he said softly. "Could I see the baby?"

"What?" Ky-Tann seemed surprised at the request.

Devia leaped to her feet. "Of course, Deeze, I'll bring her." To Ky-Tann, she said: "Ky, you idiot, get Deeze a drink or something."

"I just want to see the baby. It's a girl, isn't it?"

"Her name is Su-Tann," Devia said.

WHEN the baby was brought into the room, cooing softly and trying her new tooth against a thumbnail, Deeze took the infant into his lap and studied its small, chubby face with an air of solemnity that troubled Ky-Tann and his wife. After a moment, Deeze smiled painfully. "What luck," he said. "She looks like you, Devia. It would have been awful if she had looked like Ky."

Devia laughed, but they could see that Deeze had labored to make the joke. She took the infant from him, and let Su-Tann crawl about the heated floor. Deeze watched her progress and then looked up, flashing his old grin. "But I suppose you're waiting to hear about my great Discovery? Think of it, Ky! A dead planet, a genuine lost civilization! Not a hoax this time . . ." He spoke avidly, but his eyes were bewildered, the eyes of a man injured in battle.

"It can wait," Ky-Tann said. "You're tired. Deeze."

"I'll tell you now," Deeze said.

* * *

"It was in the second quadrant of the galaxy as charted by Roa-Pitin, the outer spiral arm we call Evarion; our hydrogen radiation equipment had been receiving an exciting pattern of signals since our journey had begun. Of course, we weren't the first exploration team to be lured by those signals, countless others had dashed themselves to pieces for that electronic siren song. We employed every navigational device we knew to put us within range of the strongest beams, but the fact that we succeeded can only be described as an accident—or the will of a power greater than anything we know."

Ky-Tann looked narrow-eyed. "A Super-Being?"

"A Super-Memory," Deeze said. "Let's call it that. At any rate, our equipment fixed on a star of low magnitude with a nine-planet system. Simple calculation of distances and spectroscopic readings eliminated all but one of the worlds as suitable for exploration. It was the third planet in relative distance from its sun. But we felt no unusual expectation as we prepared for landfall; the closer we came, the more we recognized the bleak, airless type of world that has become so familiar to the exploration ships of Illyri that we call them nothing more than cosmic debris."

"We made our landing on the ledge of a gigantic basin that might once have been the container for a vast ocean. Gi-Linn, our ship's scientist, was convinced by the configuration of its floor that the planet had once been blessed with water, air, and in all probability, some form of life. He speculated that the vanished ocean might have once teemed with creatures as those we discovered on Vosa. He was doubtful, however, that life forms had become more advanced than Vosa's. Gi-Linn has a way of leaping to conclusions, a smug fellow. I was pleased to see him proved wrong.

WE skedded across this dry ocean floor a distance of some two to three thousand amfions, and found its peaks and valleys marvelous to behold but utterly devoid of vegetation. Gi-Linn made some cursory examinations of mineral specimens during our flight, and reported that the planet's crust was an astonishing mixture of various layers, ranging in geological age from millions of years to mere thousands. It was further evidence that this world hadn't always been a barren rock, that a cataclysmic volcanic upheaval had altered its terrain, sifted and blended its strata, had dried its oceans and swallowed its continents. For the first time, we be-

gan to look upon this particular planet with more than routine interest.

"And then we saw it.

"At first, Totin, our navigator, swore it was only an optical trick, an illusion of the sort we had encountered on other worlds. Once, on a planet in the Cas-serian system, we had each of us seen a herd of cattle grazing peacefully in a green field—this on a planet of interminable yellow dust. But there was nothing dreamlike about the great metallic ruin that came into our sight, this giant who seemed to lift its shattered arm to us in greeting.

"I have seen terrors, and beasts, and horrors of the flesh, but I tell you now that never before have I experienced such a pounding of the heart as when that alien monument came into view. For not only was it plainly a remnant of a forgotten civilization, the first we had ever found, but it was also apparent that the ancients who had lived—and died—on this world had been cut from the same evolutionary cloth as we of Illyri.

"The figure was that of a woman."

Devia, who had been listening open-mouthed, said:

"A woman! Deez, how thrilling! It's like some marvelous old fable—"

"She stood some ninety amfs high," Deez said, "buried to the

shoulder in the arid soil of the planet. Her right arm was extended towards the heavens, and clutched within her hand was a torch plainly meant to symbolize the shedding of light. Her headpiece was a crown of spikes, her features noble and filled with sadness. She was blackened with the grime of centuries, battered by time, and yet still wonderfully preserved in the airless atmosphere.

"We were thrilled by the sight of this ancient wonder, and speculated about its builders. Had they been giants her size, or had they erected her as a Colossus to celebrate some great deed or personage or ruler? What did she mean to her builders, what did her uplifted torch signify? What aspirations, hopes, dreams? Could we find the answer beneath that dry sail?"

"Did you dig?" Ky-Tann said, his eyes shining with excitement. "You weren't equipped for any major excavation work, were you?"

"No; the most we could have done was scratch the surface of the planet, perhaps enough to free the entire figure of the Colossus. But that wasn't enough; we burned with curiosity to know what lay under our feet, what buried cities, people, histories . . . Totin set up a signal station, and beamed our message to the space station on Briaticus.

After a few days, we made contact, and relayed our story. There was skepticism at first, but they finally agreed to dispatch all available manpower and excavation equipment to the planet Earth."

"The planet what?" Devia said.

"Earth," Deez said, with a wan smile. "That was its name, eons ago, and the builders, who were called Earthmen, lived within natural and artificial boundaries called nations, empires, states, dominions, protectorates, satallites, and commonwealths. That empty globe had once housed as many as three *billion* of these Earthmen, and their works were prodigious. Their science was advanced, and they had already thrust their ships into the space of their own solar system . . ."

Ky-Tann was plainly startled.

"Deez, you're really serious about this? It's not another hoax?"

"I've seen the ruins of their cities, I've touched their dry bones, I've turned the pages of their books . . ." Deez' eyes glowed, pulsating eerily. "We found libraries, Ky, great volumes of writing, in languages astonishingly varied and yet many that were swiftly encodable . . . We've seen their machines and their houses, their working tools and their play-

things. We found their histories, records of their bodies and voices, their manners and morals and sometimes mad behavior . . . Ky!" Deez said, his voice choked. "It'll take a hundred years to understand all we've found!"

Devia rose quickly at the sound of his agitated voice, and went to his side. "Try not to overexcite yourself," she said. "I know how you must feel . . ."

"You can't. You can't possibly," Deez muttered. "To know the overwhelming—*greediness* I felt—turned loose in an archeological treasure house—I began waking up at night, sweating at the thought that I might die before I had seen all there was to see on that planet, read all its books, learned all its secrets—"

"And what *did* you learn?" Ky-Tann said.

Deez stood up slowly. He crossed the room to the view-glass, but they knew his eyes looked out at nothing.

"I learned," he said bitterly, "that it was a world which deserved to die."

* * *

ON a balmy June evening, in the Spring of 1973, Dr. Carl Woodward opened his front door on a new era. The man who stood on his doorstep—Woodward never thought of Borsu as anything but a "man"—wore a sleeveless tunic that glistened like snake-

skin. He was holding something in his hands, as if proffering it, a foot-square metallic box with rounded corners and a diamond-shaped screen that showed a moving tracery of spidery-thin lines.

Woodward was sixty-one. He had been a naval surgeon in two wars, and had lost a leg during the Inchon landing. He had survived the loss, but a treacherous heart condition forced his retirement. He chose a small village in Eastern Pennsylvania. He lived with a dog and a thousand books. Borsu, the alien, could not have chanced on a better host that night.

"Yes, what is it?" Woodward said. When no answer came, the doctor realized that his visitor expected him to watch the screen. He did. The lines wavered, shifted, blurred in their excitation, but conveyed nothing. Panacea, Woodward's aging beagle, finally came out of his warm bed near the furnace and set up a furious barking.

"Pan!" Woodward snapped. "Shut up, you mutt! Look, mister, perhaps if you came inside—"

Then his eyes became adjusted to the diamond-shaped screen; he saw a picture. The scene was a forest; there was the gleam of crumpled metal, and a prostrate figure lying on the leaf-strewn floor. It was the portrait of an ac-

cident, and Woodward was intuitive enough to know that the man in the doorway had come for help.

"You want me to come with you, is that it?" he said. "Is your friend hurt? How did it happen?"

THE screen refocused. Now Woodward saw the injured "man" more closely, saw the face blue in the moonlight, saw the lacerations on his cheek and forehead. Then the "camera" traveled downwards, towards the ribs, almost as if it were exploring the extent of the injuries for diagnosis (later, he learned this was true).

"Well, come on," he said gruffly. He took his coat and instrument bag from the hall closet, and shut the door on Panacea's hysteria. When he was outside with his visitor, he saw his face for the first time. Then he knew that the face he had seen in the tiny screen hadn't merely looked blue in the moonlight. It was blue. A smoky, almost lavender blue. Those who came to hate the aliens described it as purple, but Borsu, his dying companion, and all the aliens who followed were blue-skinned.

Woodward was in a fever of excitement by the time he reached the scene of the crash, in the woods some five hundred yards from his home. He understood its

significance by now, knew that the fallen vessel had been some kind of space craft, that its dual occupants were visitors from another world. The fact that he had been first on the scene thrilled him; the fact that he was a doctor, and could help, gratified him.

But there was nothing in his black bag which could aid the crash victim. His black-pupiled eyes rolled in the handsome blue head, and his fine-boned blue hand reached for the touch of his companion's fingers in a gesture of farewell. Then he was dead.

"I'm sorry," Woodward said. "Your friend is gone."

There was no grief evident in the placid blue face that looked down at the body. Once again, the alien lifted the metal box and forced the doctor's attention on the diamond-shaped screen.

The picture was that of Woodward's house.

"You want to come home with me?" Woodward said. Then he gasped as he saw himself on the screen, entering the house, alone. Then he realized that the scene typified a request—or a command. The man from space wanted the doctor to return home.

"All right," he said reluctantly. "I'll go home, my friend. But I can tell you right now—don't expect me to keep all this a secret."

He turned, and limped through the woods.

Woodward had just entered the house when the woods burst with light, one incredible split-second of white fire that lit the world for miles. It was the alien's funeral pyre.

Then the alien came back. When the doctor answered the door, he strode into the room purposefully, and placed his strange visual aid on a table top. He looked squarely at Woodward, and then placed a finger in the center of his smooth blue forehead.

"Borsu," he said.

The doctor hesitated. Was the alien identifying himself by name? Indicating himself by the most vital organ, his brain?

The doctor pointed to his own forehead.

"Carl," he said.

Then he looked about, and his eyes fell on the book he had been reading. He picked it up, and tapped its cover.

"Book," he said.

The stranger took it from his hand.

"Book," he said. "Borsu, Carl. Book."

And the alien smiled.

WOODWARD handled his request to see Ridgemont, Secretary of Science, with extreme care. He understood the functions and fears of the bureaucrat,

the ever-present concern about wasting time on crackpots, lobbyists, representatives of various useless or lunatic fringe groups. He had arranged the meeting through the Secretary of the Navy, and made certain that Ridgemont knew of his good service record, that he was convinced that Woodward was a man of sound mind and character. Only then did he make the appointment.

Yet despite his precautions, Ridgemont looked at Woodward exactly as the doctor knew he would.

"A man from *where*?" he said.

"From outer space," Woodward said quietly. "Not from our own solar system, but from another. Their world exists no longer. Borsu and the others recall nothing about it, but that was a case of deliberate Forgetting; I'll tell you about that later. The important thing is—"

"The important thing," Woodward said icily, "is for you to see the right person. Frankly, this department isn't concerned with—extra-terrestrial matters. Perhaps the Department of Defense —"

"I've thought about this for some time," Woodward persisted. "I believe you're the one person most capable of both understanding and helping. Please don't disappoint me."

Perhaps Ridgemont was flat-

tered; at any rate, he calmed down and let the doctor speak.

"Borsu and a companion came to Earth about a month ago, their descent undetected except by the astronomical observatory at Clifton; if you check with meteor landing. But it wasn't a meteor. It was a space vessel, and its crash killed Borsu's friend. You won't find traces of it, either, because Borsu followed his people's tradition of totally annihilating the remains. No, it wasn't a secret weapon of any kind; he merely triggered the ship's atomic reactor.

"Borsu came to me by chance. But when he discovered I was sympathetic, he allowed me to become his mentor and teacher of language. I couldn't have wanted a better student; he's already read and digested half the books I own.

"I have had long conversation with Borsu, about his past and his future hopes; indeed, the hopes of his entire race. When I learned his story, and understood why he came to our world, I decided to act as his emissary. Borsu has a mortal—and understandable—fear of being treated like a freak or a guinea pig. I'm here to pave the way for him, and the others."

RIDGEMONT must have been aware of Woodward's sincerity; he looked astonished.

"You really mean this, don't you?" he said. "A man from another planet is here, with you?"

"Yes," Woodward said firmly. "In my own home. But I cannot give you the name of his world, and neither can Borsu. At the moment, their way-station is an airless asteroid in our solar system, where they are living in an artificial atmosphere and surviving on synthetic food. There are fewer than ten thousand of them, refugees from a world which suffered a fate so terrible that they have allowed themselves to forget everything about it."

"Forget? What do you mean?"

"They have a belief, an ancient conviction, about Forgetting. I don't know whether it's cultural, or religious, or scientific in origin; but each generation conceals the past from the new generation, especially those things in the past which have been unpleasant or hurtful. They are future-minded; they believe their children are sounder mentally if they know nothing of past evils. Whatever happened on the world of their birth is a story only their dead ancestors knew. Their interest is only in tomorrow."

"And just what kind of tomorrow do they have in mind?"

Woodward took a deep breath.

"They wish to migrate to Earth, Mr. Ridgemont. All of them. Their evolutionary devel-

opment was virtually identical to ours; when I marveled at this, Borsu laughed heartily at me. It is the belief of their science—or perhaps their theology—that the physical form both races share is the only one possible to the intelligent beings of the universe. So you see,” Woodward said wryly, “perhaps the old prophets were right, when they said that God made Man in his own image. Perhaps it’s the only possible image in the cosmos.”

“Then they look like us? Exactly like us?”

“Not exactly, no. There are some—surface differences. I know nothing of Borsu’s interior construction, only X rays could tell us that.”

Ridgemont said, suspiciously: “What surface differences?”

“They are somewhat more angular than we are, a bit taller. Their craniums are larger, their shoulders narrower and bones finer. Borsu told me that they have no tonsils or appendix. In a way, they might be one lateral step higher on the evolutionary scale than the people of Earth. Their science is slightly more advanced in some areas, behind us in others. And of course, the number of their scientists and technicians is greatly limited.” Woodward paused. “And they are blue. A soft, pleasant shade, but unmistakably—blue.”

The Secretary’s chair creaked.

“And they want to settle *here*? Among us?”

“They feel sure that our races will be compatible, sharing as we do our evolutionary heritage, that—”

“One moment,” Ridgemont said sharply. “When you say compatible—are you implying that these creatures can interbreed with us?”

The doctor winced at the word “creatures.” But his reply was soft.

“No,” he said. “That coincidence would be too great. But they have no such desires; they will be happy to produce their own future generations of citizens. They have deliberately controlled their birthrate until they could find a home. Earth can be that home, Mr. Ridgemont, but they wish to be sure of a welcome.”

THE Secretary stood up, and came to the front of the desk to face the doctor.

“Dr. Woodward,” he said, “your story is an incredible one, but for the moment I’ll assume that everything you’ve said is true. Naturally, visitors from another planet—who mean us no harm, and who can impart knowledge to us—would be more than welcome on Earth. They would be celebrated by every man of Science on this planet.”

“Borsu understands that. But

it's not the scientists whose welcome they seek. It's the people of Earth."

"Doctor, I cannot speak for the people of Earth," Ridgemont frowned, and rubbed his forehead. "Where would these aliens of yours want to live? How would they live? Assimilated among the peoples of Earth? In their own community, a nation reserved for them alone?"

"I can't say. These are questions to be decided by others—"

"Does this Borsu expect us to guarantee this welcome? To assure them that they will be received with open arms? People are strange. Once the initial excitement of their arrival is over, who can say how ordinary citizens will react?"

"You must understand that they come in peace and friendship. They are tired, weary of searching for a home. They need our help—"

"You say they're *blue*, doctor." Ridgemont's eyes were penetrating. "Do you think the world can withstand still another race problem? Do you?"

"I don't know," Woodward said miserably. "I'm only Borsu's friend, Mr. Ridgemont, his emissary. I can't answer questions like this. I thought that you, a man of science—"

"As a scientist, your Borsu fascinates me, of course. I'd like to interrogate him for years. I'd

like to dissect his mind and body until I know everything about him and his people. But you're asking me a different question. You're asking—do I want Borsu as a neighbor?"

Woodward stood up. His face was pale, and the leg that wasn't there throbbed with pain. He was sweating, a gray sweat that coursed down his seamed cheek and soiled the collar of his shirt.

"I don't feel well," he said. "If you'd excuse me—"

"Of course," Ridgemont said solicitously. "We can talk more about this later, when you feel up to it . . ."

"Yes," Woodward said.

THAT night, in a hotel room in Washington, Dr. Carl Woodward died of a coronary thrombosis.

Secretary of Science Ridgemont, however, was curious enough about the doctor's story to send a deputation to his home in Pennsylvania. As a simple precaution, one of the men in the party was an armed policeman named Sergeant Kemmer. At the first sight of the blue-skinned man, Kemmer became alarmed enough to draw his gun. Borsu recognized the weapon, and its dangerous potential, from his reading. Frightened, he tried to flee through the front door, and Kemmer misinterpreted his movement as an attack. He fired

three times. One of the bullets penetrated Borsu's temple, and killed him instantly.

Three months passed before the next delegation from the aliens appeared on Earth. This time, their arrival was detected, and the visitors were brought safely to the local authorities in the Nebraska community where their vessel landed. Their names were Cor, Basuc, and Stytin. Stytin was a female, lovely in her blue-skinned shapeliness.

A team of scientists were dispatched from Washington, Tokyo, and London to take charge of the alien trio. It was another two weeks before their marvelous facility with language permitted them to talk intelligently to their examiners.

On November 8, 1973, Stytin, the blue female, was found assaulted, mutilated, and murdered in the woods near the town of Ponchi. The brutal slaying shocked the scientists, who tried to assure Cor and Basuc that the episode had not been typical of the behavior of the people of Earth. But Cor and Basuc, who had no memory-record of killing, became terrified, and fled. Cor was shot and killed by a farmer, and Basuc was accidentally drowned while forging a stream during his escape.

The death of the four aliens, however, didn't prevent the migration from beginning. Hunger

—not for food alone, but for the blessed green promise of the Earth—drove the blue aliens to make the journey before receiving assurance of their welcome. Their tiny two, three, and four-man craft began dotting the heavens, filling the world with fears and panics that were only partially allayed by the repeated assurances of the world's leaders. Despite explanations and pleas for order, the blue people were frequently slain the moment their ships touched Earth. There was never an official estimate of the deaths, but it was certain that well over three thousand of the aliens lost their lives before ever tasting a drop of cool Earth water, or knowing the shade of an Earth tree, the peaceful blue of an Earth sky.

Finally, the killings were over. Less than seven thousand Blues survived the perilous journey, protected upon their arrival by contingents of armed soldiers, sped to the scene of the landings in time to stop the citizens from their slaughter.

IT was Mostyn Herbert, Secretary-General of the United Nations, who made the first speech of welcome, before the general assembly.

"The world," he said, "has seen a new migration in these past months, an event which has brought new hours of infamy to

the human race. The savagery of man to beast, the bestiality of man to man, has now been exceeded by our shameful record of cruelty towards these homeless wanderers from a forgotten world. We have slain almost a third of their number wantonly and without cause. They proffered to us the wisdom and knowledge of their own civilization, and asked for nothing in return but sanctuary. We have answered them with murder, and rape, and a bigotry that has exceeded all others in the long and reeking history of human injustice. It is time for the human race to call a halt; not merely for the sake of our alien visitors, but for the sake of the almighty soul of Man. We must hold out our hand, and say 'Welcome. Welcome to Earth!'

Moved by the plea of the Secretary-General, the assembly voted to form a 12-nation commission to study the problem. Many governments made offers of hospitality to the aliens; the United States, Canada, Australia, the Scandinavian and Low Countries, all expressed a willingness to set aside land areas for the exclusive use of the aliens. The U.S.S.R. made no offer of land, but suggested that the Blues could be completely integrated into Russian society. The choice was left to the Blues and their leader, an Elder named Trecor.

The wisdom of Trecor's decision became a subject of debate for generations to come. He declined to isolate his people as a "nation," separate and apart from the human race. He declined to have them as boarders within any one sovereign state. Instead, he asked that the Blues be divided into small communities and dispersed over the world, where each could work out their individual destiny. His purpose was a noble one: he wished to make his people truly the neighbors, even the partners, of the Earthmen.

And so it was.

In the United States, a Blue community began a collective farming project on acreage deeded to them by the government in Kansas. Within three years, the crops of winter wheat and corn produced on the Blue farmlands were so superior in quality that they provoked the admiration, and envy, of every farmer in the district. In '77, the year of the Terrible Twisters, only the Blue farmlands were miraculously spared the destruction of their fields. The ignorant claimed that some spiritual agency had helped the Blues; the more enlightened credited the sturdiness of their crops. But both became united in a sullen resentment of the Blues, the strangers who had committed the unpardonable sin of prospering in a season of want.

From these beginnings came the illicit organization of terrorists who called themselves the Dom-Dom, a name originally meaning Defenders of Mankind. Between the years 1977 and 1991, the Dom-Dom could take the blame for the violent deaths of more than a thousand Blues.

IN New Zealand, another farming community of Blues fared better than their fellows in Kansas. But in the year 1982, they fell victim to the still-unnamed plague which Earthmen merely called the Blue Disease. It seemed to strike only the aliens, but it resembled typhoid in its symptoms and deadly progress. The Blues themselves became unable to cope with the disease; their pleas for outside medical help brought only a handful of Earth physicians. When one of them, a Dr. Martin Roebuck, died of a seizure that the Blues swore was unrelated to the plague, the others fled in fear of contagion. Their statement to the world press claimed that the biological differences between Earthmen and Blues were too great for Earth medicine to be of value. And so the Blues of New Zealand died. The white flash of their funeral pyres lit the night again and again.

In Russia, a non-farming community of Blues, composed mainly of artists and scientists, lived

in a government-constructed "city" and were carefully nurtured and pampered like talented, precocious children. After five years of this treatment, the Blues sickened of it and yearned for a freer life. With the eyes of the world upon them, the Russians quickly agreed to the Blue demands. Yes, they could do as they please, live as they please, work as they please. One by one, their privileges were withdrawn. The Blues found that they had to provide their own food, their own clothing, maintain their own shelters; the Russians had given them independence with a vengeance. They found themselves unable to care for their own elementary needs; they were like helpless children; they began quarreling among themselves. For the first time in the remembered history of the race, a Blue killed another Blue; it was said that the shame of this episode was the cause of the Elder Trecor's death. Eventually, the Blues surrendered; they preferred the easy comforts of their prison, and begged their jailers to lower the bars again.

In the thirty-six years of the Blues' residence on Earth, only four thousand births were recorded; while ten thousand of the race perished.

It was in the year 2009, following the Kansas City Massacre by the Dom-Dom, in which eight

hundred Blues died under the flamethrowers of the terrorists, that the Decision was reached. It was relayed to the world by an Elder named Dasru, whose prepared statement was read to the United Nations.

"We came to your world unbidden and unwelcome," the statement said. "We came to your world asking no privilege, bearing no arms, wishing for no more than forbearance for our differences, patience for our ignorance, and sympathy for our homelessness. We offered love and received hatred. We came in peace and died in war.

"We love the sweet green fields of your planet, its clear water and skies, its generous soil. But you have never permitted Earth to become our home, and so we leave you. We leave you, people of the cruel planet. Rather than suffer your bigotry, and yes, your tolerance, we leave you. We go to seek another homeland, and in the minds of our future generations no memory of this hated visit shall remain. We shall Forget you, Earth; but may you always remember, what drove us from your world."

Then the exodus began. One by one, the small spacecraft of the Blues began to rise towards the heavens. Before the next Spring came to Earth, the Blues were gone.

Ky-Tann cleared his throat,

and looked at his young wife. Devia stared at Deez.

"How long ago?" Ky-Tann asked. "When did this happen?"

"Perhaps three, four thousand years ago," Deez said. "They left the Earth to its fate, and eventually that fate was extinction. Some defect in its sun caused an outburst of nuclear fire, and shriveled the planet to what it has become. But still *she* stands, their goddess of welcome, lifting her torch to the empty skies.

"When we dug up that statue, do you know what we found? There was an inscription on the base. When we learned the story of that planet's past, the irony of those words was poignant."

"Do you remember them?"

"I could never forget them," Deez said, and his eyes were dark. "*Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore; send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed, to me; I lift my lamp beside the golden door.*"

There was silence. Ky-Tann became aware of his wife's tears.

He went to her, and she wiped her eyes. "I'd better put Su-Tann to bed," she said, trying to smile at Deez. "Did you see her tooth, Deez? It's her very first."

Ky-Tann took his wife's blue hand, and kissed her blue cheek. "A beautiful tooth," he said.

L. Sprague de Camp: sword and satire

By SAM MOSKOWITZ

IT has become the vogue in science fiction to term every type of satire "Swiftian." Aside from the fact that Swift did not originate the technique of employing humor and fantasy for the purpose of ridicule (though he was unquestionably its most skillful exponent) there are other schools of satire and frequently their purpose is to ennoble, not denigrate, current progress and mores. One of the few chief exponents of the use of satire in science fiction is L. Sprague de Camp.

De Camp's blend of humor and criticism was akin to Mark Twain's whose *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* served as the model for de Camp's most successful novel *Lest Darkness Fall* (UNKNOWN, Dec., 1939). While de Camp acknowledged the shortcomings of our present civilization, he used satire to show that it was still better than any previous one,

possibly even better than most to come, and he buttressed his opinion with impressive scholarship.

In *Lest Darkness Fall* a lightning bolt sends archaeologist Martin Padway back to the decadent period of Rome in the sixth century A.D. His attempts first to survive and then to use his scientific knowledge to halt the decline of Rome parallel Twain.

"People sometimes accuse me of writing satire," de Camp began in the introduction to his first short story collection, *The Wheels of If*, published by Shasta in 1948. "This, if not exactly a vile canard, is at least an inaccurate statement, because in the strict sense satire is ridiculing established conditions, conventions, or institutions by exaggeration or burlesque in the hope of changing them. In other words, it has social significance, which is just the thing I studiously avoid in my stories. These yarns are meant purely to amuse

and entertain, and neither to instruct, nor to incite or improve."

LYON Sprague de Camp was born in an apartment on 93rd Street, New York City, Nov. 27, 1907. His mother, Beatrice Sprague, was the daughter of the Civil War hero, educator, inventor, banker, economist and linguist Charles Ezra Sprague, founder of The School of Commerce at New York University.

The boy enjoyed his summers in the Adirondacks (where his father, Lyon, Sr., owned 20,000 acres) canoeing around the swamps, digging up specimens and examining them under the microscope.

De Camp remembers being a difficult child, insisting on his own way in everything. Figuring to take some of the contrariness out of him, the family decided to send him to an institute with military discipline, Snyder School in North Carolina. There young Sprague really ran into trouble. Precociously intellectual, already a master of the snide remark, his tongue helped get him clobbered every day for 10 years. Awkward and thin, he was an ineffective fighter and became a safe target for every bully on the campus. This perpetually humiliating personal agony was delineated in *Judgment Day* (ASTOUNDING SCIENCE-FICTION, Aug., 1955) and result-

ed in a protective veneer of unemotional impersonality which he found difficult to discard as he matured. He cultivated a smiling, agreeable manner but kept his feelings so well covered that all but his close friends regarded him as a cold personality.

A good student, but not an exceptional one, his earliest passion was the study of bugs. Later, he hoped to become a paleontologist. This was put aside to make way for the more practical prospects of aeronautical engineering. At the California Institute of Technology he was delighted to find none of the persecutions of grade and high school in the intellectual atmosphere of the university; he quickly won the editorship of the college paper and even to a small athletic distinction as a member of the fencing team.

When he graduated in 1930, Sprague went to work with his father in the Adirondacks. The strenuous activity, including surveying, strengthened him physically. He decided to go for his Masters at Stevens Institute, Hoboken, N.J. and secured it in June, 1933, majoring in engineering and economics. His first job was with the Inventors Foundation Inc., Hoboken, where he gave a course for inventors. The school was taken over by The International Correspondence Schools and he went to work for

them in Scranton, Pa. When he resigned in 1937 de Camp held the title of Principal of the School of Inventing and Patenting. Several years earlier he had collaborated with Alf K. Berle on a book which appeared as *Inventions and Their Management* from the International Textbook Co., Scranton in 1937. This was his first professional work and it has gone through a number of revisions and editions since then, becoming a standard reference on the subject, having been cited in at least one Supreme Court action.

IN 1937 de Camp returned to New York to take a job as editor on a trade journal. As early as 1936 he had attempted fiction writing. His first was *The Hairless Ones Come*, a prehistory tale eventually published in the Jan., 1939 issue of the short-lived *GOLDEN FLEECE*. His ex-college roommate, John D. Clark, introduced him to P. Schuyler Miller, a professional sf author. De Camp collaborated with Miller on *Genus Homo*, a novel of a busload of men and women who are buried in a tunnel cave-in and come to in the far future when no human remains and intelligent apes are the leading species. The early part is a straight action adventure reminiscent of Murray Leinster's *Red Dust*. The latter part describing

the ape culture contains all the elements of satire, humor and dialogue that have become de Camp's trademark. Publication eluded it until the March, 1941 *SUPER SCIENCE STORIES*.

A "first" sale for de Camp came sooner than expected. *The Isolinguals*, a story of a machine which caused ancestral memories to prevail over current ones was published in the Sept., 1937 issue of *ASTOUNDING STORIES*. Now a member of the "establishment," de Camp attended a meeting at the apartment of John D. Clark in New York where he was introduced to such notables as Julius Schwartz, literary agent; Mort Weisinger, editor of *THRILLING WONDER STORIES*; Henry Kuttner, aspiring author; and John W. Campbell, Jr., soon to become editor of *ASTOUNDING STORIES*. This was all very exciting, but a single sale wasn't enough to retire on. In Dec., 1937 de Camp took a job as assistant editor on a trade magazine, *FUEL OIL JOURNAL*. An economy wave left him unemployed after only three months. There was little to do but take another crack at science fiction.

Campbell bought *Hyperpolity*, an entertaining episode on the sociological impact of the spontaneous growth of a furlike coating of hair on all men and women (*ASTOUNDING SCIENCE-FICTION*, April, 1938). The reader

reception was only mild. Oddly enough, de Camp was to score his first literary hit with an article, *Language for Time Travelers*, which appeared in the July, 1938, ASTOUNDING SCIENCE-FICTION. Tales of "tempenautical" excursions into the future had long been common, but no one had considered the problems of communication that would arise from the gradual change in pronunciation and semantics. With humor and a deft style which cloaked the scholarship, de Camp's *Language for Time Travelers* was the first non-fiction to gain top honors in reader acclaim in the history of ASTOUNDING SCIENCE-FICTION.

THE next time in print de Camp scored a runaway first place for fiction with *The Command* (ASTOUNDING SCIENCE-FICTION, Oct., 1938) introducing Johnny Black, the bear with the souped-up brain and the compulsion to master chemistry. The title was prophetic, for by popular command de Camp was forced to turn out three sequels concerning his genius-rated brain. The high rating of *The Command* won him the cover of the Dec., 1939 ASTOUNDING SCIENCE-FICTION for *The Merman*, a chronicle of a man who invents a chemical that makes it possible to breathe under water. This also tied for first place, beating out

competition as formidable as Lester del Rey's *Helen O Loy*. In the brief period of but 15 months de Camp had moved out into the front rank of science fiction writers. The influence of Mark Twain, which was to become so patently obvious in *Lest Darkness Fall*, was earlier evident in *Divide and Rule*, a two-part novel which ran in UNKNOWN for April and May, 1939. A kangaroo-like race of aliens conquer the earth and restore knighthood as a means of keeping mankind in subjugation. The details of an unique social set-up, was engrossingly worked out.

UNKNOWN was to become an almost legendary crucible of a new type of logical fantasy for grownups, and de Camp was to play a major role in its reputation. Immediately following *Divide and Rule*, his *Gnarly Man* (UNKNOWN, June, 1939), revealing the discovery of a 50,000-old Neanderthal man who is making a living as a "wild man" in a side show, broke ground for an entirely new approach on the treatment of such material. Readers of the Sept., 1939 UNKNOWN were treated, in *None But Lucifer* (in collaboration with H. L. Gold), to the shockingly original concept of a man who so outdoes the devil that he replaces him!

During the period he was writing his way to reader acceptance, de Camp roomed with Robert N.

Lyon, a junior engineer. At a New Year's Eve party thrown by Lyon he was introduced to Catherine Crook, who taught at a private school. Isaac Asimov was later to note that she "looked like the younger daughter of a British peer. I have long considered her the most beautiful blonde in science-fiction. I can say this safely as my own wife is a decided brunette."

On their third date de Camp proposed. The problem now was money for a honeymoon. De Camp vigorously launched into the final draft of *Lest Darkness Fall*. The more he wrote the longer the novel seemed to get and it appeared that his marriage and honeymoon would be indefinitely delayed. Then Catherine suggested that there was no reason why they could not finish it after their marriage. So the nuptials took place Aug. 12, 1939. The next two days de Camp pounded the typewriter in the hotel room, finally getting the manuscript over to Campbell who got him a check while he waited. Only then was he off on his honeymoon.

AMONG those impressed by de Camp's sprightly and entertaining scholarship was Fletcher Pratt, a tiny man with a pointed beard who had gained a reputation as a military expert and had published a number of much-

praised volumes on American and European history. As early as 1928 Pratt was a contributor to *AMAZING STORIES* and had been a dilettante in the genre through the years, most frequently with a collaborator. In common with de Camp he also had a great interest in languages and had translated many science fiction stories from the German and French for Hugo Gernsback's magazines.

The two were introduced by John D. Clark and in no time at all they began plotting a fantasy for *UNKNOWN* based on the Norse legends. The result was the creation of Harold Shea, a bored psychologist who uses a principle suggested by one of his colleagues to whisk him off to a time and land where the "natural" laws are magic and almost anything goes. De Camp wrote the first draft of *The Roaring Trumpet* and Pratt polished it. The result, which appeared in the May, 1940 *UNKNOWN*, was instantly recognized as a milestone among many milestones in the history of that magazine. A brilliant piece of work, it added a new dimension to the legends of Thor, Loki, Odin, and the other beloved gods of the North. Shea was immediately shuttled off to the land of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* in *Mathematics of Magic*, a sequel which appeared in the Aug., 1940 *UNKNOWN*. This proved less popular, pos-

sibly because Spenser's work was not so familiar to the average reader as were the Norse myths.

The two novels were combined into a book and published in 1941 by Henry Holt as *The Incomplete Enchanter*. The same year Henry Holt put *Lest Darkness Fall* into hard covers. This was an era when fantasy pulp authors still were not respectable and de Camp's feat in achieving two trade books from an important book publisher in a single year carried monumental prestige. The volumes received good reviews and the sales, though modest (probably not over 1500 apiece) were passable for that era. The result was that another collaboration with Fletcher Pratt, *Land of Unreason* (UNKNOWN WORLDS, Oct., 1941) went into hard covers under the Henry Holt imprint in 1942. Of the 15 stories de Camp had published in UNKNOWN and UNKNOWN WORLDS from April, 1939 to Aug., 1942, all but one, *None But Lucifer*, would eventually appear in hard covers, a tribute to his ability at popularizing the whacky variety of fiction that appeared in that magazine.

Despite his preoccupation with fantasy, de Camp was holding his own against a formidable array of competition in science fiction that included Heinlein, van

Vogt, Sturgeon and Asimov. *The Stolen Dormouse*, a two-part novel in the April and May 1941 issues of ASTOUNDING SCIENCE-FICTION, was as clever and adroit in its image of American big business hardening into feudal cast's as anything his contemporaries were doing in their specialties at the time.

How well de Camp would have stood up in a continuous literary competition was never to be tested. A friend and classmate of Heinlein's, Lt. Commander A. B. Scoles of the U.S. Navy Reserve, wanted science fiction writers as engineers at the Naval Aircraft Factory in Philadelphia. Heinlein, de Camp, and eventually Asimov were to be employed at the Philadelphia Naval Yard as civilian engineers. De Camp, who entered in July 15, 1942 and took the naval training courses at Dartmouth, emerged a full lieutenant in the Naval Reserve. He was assigned to do test and development work on parts, materials and accessories for naval aircraft, which included cold room and altitude chamber work.

DURING the war years de Camp's writing virtually ceased. But another attribute of his nature came to the fore: a passion for research. This penchant was obvious in his fiction and even more pronounced in the rather frequent articles he had

done for ASTOUNDING SCIENCE-FICTION on subjects as diverse as brown rats (*The Long-Tailed Huns*, ASTOUNDING SCIENCE-FICTION, Jan., 1942) and the development of the armored tank (*Come and Get Under*, ASTOUNDING SCIENCE-FICTION, Dec., 1942). He was one of the few top-rank science fiction writers of the time whose non-fiction was every bit as good as his fiction. He researched continuously for "a book on magic, witchcraft, and occultism," which was originally scheduled by Henry Holt. One chapter of this book, *The Unwritten Classics*, was the feature article of the March 29, 1947, SATURDAY REVIEW OF LITERATURE. It concerned "works" connected with the occult which were almost as well known as classics yet which were what de Camp termed "*psuedobiblia*," fake bibliographical references. Included were such titles as *The Book of Thorn*, *The Story of Setnau*, *The Book of Dzian* and of course *The Necronomicon*. A financial crisis at Holt aborted publication of the magic book, but de Camp has since used most of the material in articles and in other books.

Earlier, an article had appeared in the May, 1947 NATURAL HISTORY titled *Lost Continents*. This would eventually appear as part of *Lost Continents*, a book originally set in type by Prime Press (Philadelphia), but

after the collapse of that company Gnome Press (New York) issued the volume in 1954. De Camp not only succinctly explored the basic legends concerning Atlantis, Mu and other lost continents, but did an exhaustive analysis of the literature, including fiction, on the topic. The result was unquestionably the finest single book produced on "The Atlantis Theme in History, Science and Literature," and has become almost a basic guide to serious research in that aspect of science fiction.

To get back into fiction writing proved difficult. *The Ghosts of Melvin Pye*, a weak fantasy concerning the dual ghosts of a split personality who haunt the same building, appeared in the Dec., 1946 THRILLING WONDER STORIES. It was the only work of fiction by de Camp to see publication from 1943 to 1948 inclusive. The appearance in 1948 of *The Wheels of If*, with its amusing lead short novel of a half dozen alternate worlds (UNKNOWN, Oct., 1940) gave de Camp the kind of press he needed. Among the short stories in the volume was *The Gnarly Man*, and de Camp made his fictional comeback with a variation on the theme. *Throwback*, published in the March, 1949 ASTOUNDING SCIENCE-FICTION found giant age-men bred through reverse genetics and the nine-foot brutes

kept on reservations. Though the style was well up to de Camp's best standards, his handling of the situation potential was so circumscribed that out of six stories in the issue *Throwback* rated sixth. A second try, *The Animal Cracker Plot* (ASTOUNDING SCIENCE-FICTION, July, 1949) managed to make only third place in the ratings, but it marked the beginning of a new series known as the *Viagens Interplanetarias* (Portuguese for "interplanetary tours.")

Why Portuguese? Well, in the hypothetical future de Camp propounds, Brazil is the dominant Earth power and naturally spearheads space travel. That country speaks Portuguese. Much of the action of this series was to take place on three planets: Vishnu, Krishna and Ganesha. The stories have frequently been called *in toto* the "Krishna" stories.

Of the "Krishna" series, the most important novel was *Rogue Queen* (1951). A humanoid society with a sexual structure similar to that of bees falls in conflict with Terran philosophies. Because the plot centered on the aliens' sexual set-up, de Camp won praise for skillful handling of a delicate subject. But de Camp had always tastefully used sex theories in his work. *Rogue Queen* may well have been a key influence on Philip Jose Farmer's *The*

Lovers, which shattered SF sex taboos.

THE advent of THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION in 1949 reopened the market for pure fantasy. De Camp again teamed up with his friend Fletcher Pratt. The first story they sold the magazine, *Gavagan's Bar*, appeared in its second Winter-Spring 1950 issue and sparked a series eventually to be collected as *Tales from Gavagan's Bar* (by Twayne in 1953). The brief tales were obviously fashioned after the popular Jorkens series of Lord Dunsany, where every yarn starts at a bar.

A far more successful collaboration with Willy Ley produced *Lands Beyond*, a book from Rinehart in 1952. Here some of the research for *Lost Continents* was brought into play and two prime writers of non-fiction teamed up to apply scholarship to such legends as Atlantis, Sindbad, Prester John, the 10 lost tribes of Israel.

Hermitage House, a short-lived New York publishing firm, commissioned de Camp to write *The Science Fiction Handbook*, which proved much more than the customary volume of writing advice. It had chapters on the history and philosophy of the literature; biographical sketches of its leading practitioners; and bibliographies of recommended

readings. It was a suitable college text on the subject and was used as such by The College of the City of New York in their extension classes in Creative Science Fiction Writing.

The similarity of sequences in de Camp's *Viagens* stories to the flash and vigor of Robert S. Howard's sword and sorcery epics of Conan the Cimmerian is no accident. De Camp's analytical intellect told him that Howard's premises were implausible but his emotions were overpowered by the sagas so vividly visualized that they came to "furious and gorgeous life." In 1951 de Camp took over a box of Howard's unpublished manuscripts and proceeded to revise and edit them. Three stories went into magazine and book form almost immediately: *The Frost Giant's Daughter*, *The God in the Bowl* and *The Treasure of Trancos*. Four other straight adventure novelettes de Camp converted into Conan stories, adding elements of the supernatural; they were collected as *Tales of Conan* by Robert E. Howard and L. Sprague de Camp (Gnome Press, 1955). When a Swedish author, Bjorn Nyberg wrote a novel titled *The Return of Conan*, de Camp put it into shape for book publication by Gnome Press in 1957. For his efforts he was elected Royal Chronicler of the *Hyborian Legion* on Nov. 12,

1955, a loose-knit association composed of acolytes of Robert E. Howard.

DE CAMP'S love of historical research and zest for sword-play finally combined in *An Elephant for Aristotle*, a novel of the ingenuity and adventure required to walk a pachyderm from its natural habitat to the city of the great Greek philosopher. Critical reviews were excellent when Doubleday issued the novel in 1958. A second book, *The Bronze God of Rhodes*, followed in 1960 and for a third, *The Dragon of the Ishtar Gate* (1961), de Camp traveled through Africa. At the same time de Camp wrote a number of illustrated juvenile books on power machinery, biology and other scientific and historical subjects. He also did a book on *The Heroic Age of American Invention* for Doubleday in 1961. This did well enough to warrant a follow-up non-fiction title, *The Ancient Engineers* (1963) which proved a sprightly and deservedly praised rendition of the construction feats of the ancient Romans, Greek, Egyptian, and other early builders. It outsold all 37 of de Camp's previous books—with over 11,000 copies in print at last count—and seemed to epitomize a new phase in his writing career.

Given his choice of profes-

sions, more than anything else de Camp would have preferred a professorship at a university, where he could delve endlessly into the library and emerge with nuggets of fascinating lore which he could impart with wry humor to an endless succession of classes.

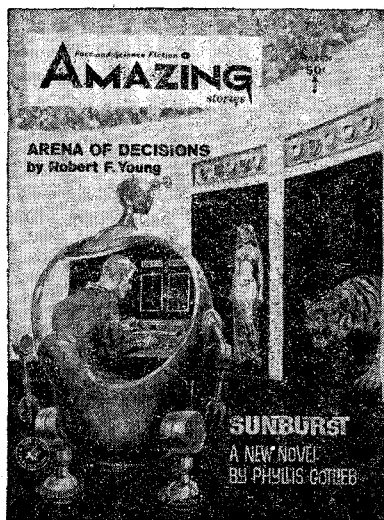
Given his choice of what he preferred to write, he would dearly love to have another crack at the Conan-type story.

Everything considered, de Camp has been lucky. How many men are given the opportunity of resolving and contrasting intellectual and physical passions in

the accepted framework of their chosen profession? De Camp was one of the earliest writers to successfully balance sex and science fiction. The fantasy world will continue to revere him as one of the patron saints of oddball humor in the modern manner. Students of literary science fiction acknowledge their debt for his outstanding contributions in clarifying the antecedents of portions of the literature.

And to modern science fiction, L. Sprague deCamp has proved one of the few writers consistently capable of effectively combining satire and humor.

COMING NEXT MONTH



There have been many novels about super-intelligent children, forerunners of "Homo Superior." But few novels have approached the emotional intensity of "Sunburst," by Phyllis Gottlieb, which headlines the March issue of AMAZING. Its hero-children are "Homo Inferior," but with talents so wild that they and the world cannot co-exist. Between them and destruction stands only—one girl.

In the same issue Robert Young spins a tale of "lady and the tiger" on a world where chance is ruler. Its title: "Arena of Decisions". . . Ben Bova outlines a startling new theory for the disappearance of the dinosaurs in a fact article, "The Time of Great Dying" . . . And our new book reviewer, Lester del Rey, takes up the cudgels of his trade for the first time in our pages.

Don't miss the March AMAZING, on sale at your newsstand February 11.

I Bring Fresh Flowers

By ROBERT F. YOUNG

*A touching tale of an Astronette
—and why the gentle rain from Heaven
has the quality of mercy.*

YOU know Rosemary Brooks. You have known her for many years.

It is said that when she was a little girl her favorite poem was *Barbara Frietchie*, and it is told how she would sometimes poke her pretty head out of her bedroom window, survey the suburban street with her blue-sky eyes, and cry, "*Shoot, if you must, this old gray head, but spare your country's flag!*"

Yes, you know Rosemary. You know her very well.

Like all little girls, Rosemary grew up. But Rosemary did not change. This is not to say that she did not turn into an attractive young lady. She turned into a most attractive one indeed. Fragilely beautiful, airy of tread, she should have been the reigning rose of every dance she went to, but she was not. Rarely did the young men of her acquaintance ask her to dance, and

never did one of them approach her and say, "Come into the garden, Rosemary, for the black bat, night, has flown." She did not go to very many dances in any event, and looking back, one realizes that the few she did attend, she attended primarily to please her mother. The reason behind Rosemary's wallflowerhood is simple: the young men of her acquaintance knew that with her, God and the United States of America came first, and that accompanying her through life, or even accompanying her home from a dance for that matter, meant being relegated to a back seat. It is all right for little girls to be *Barbara Frietchies*, you see, but not for big ones.

During her short and dedicated life, Rosemary poked her pretty head out of quite a number of windows. After the *Barbara Frietchie* window came the

Girl Scouts of America window, and after the Girl Scouts of America window came the Young Peoples' Civil War Society window, and after the Young Peoples' Civil War Society window came the Citizens for Patriotic Progress window. Last of all came the Astronette Training Center window.

SET up by Project Rain Dance in 1969 after prejudice against women going into space had abated, the Astronette Training Center had for its purpose the finding, training, and conditioning of six female pilots for a series of six manned weather-control satellite shots, the first of which was scheduled to take place some time in February of '71. After exhaustive screening, one hundred volunteers were accepted. Fifteen of them passed the exacting physical and psychological tests, and from the ranks of the fifteen, the six astronettes were chosen. Incredibly, when one considers her delicateness (and fails to consider her patriotic fervor), Rosemary not only made the grade but was selected to accompany the first weather-control satellite to be placed in orbit.

All of this is history now—faded words on newsprint, old photographs, a dozen dusty articles in as many magazines—but at the time, it captured the

attention of the whole wide world. It is said that Madison Avenue nearly went out of its mind trying to circumvent the regulation that prohibited astronettes from underwriting testimonials to toothpaste, cosmetics, and cigarettes. This is not to be wondered at. If Rosemary could have been legally enticed, for example, into letting her picture appear in a cigarette ad, cigarette consumption probably would have doubled overnight. It is one thing to be an obscure Barbara Frietchie and quite another to be a famous one, and the patriotic devotion shining in a person's eyes can, through the thaumaturgy of photography and touch-up, be transmuted into a sensual gleam.

February of '71 arrived at last, as all months must, and a specific date was set for the launching. Psychological winter had come and gone, but no singing of birds could be heard. Even as far south as Canaveral, gray skies were the rule, and gray rain fell intermittently. Countdown was begun regardless. And then, miraculously it seemed, the skies cleared, and the day of the launching dawned bright and clear. There is a photograph of Rosemary standing in her snow-white spacesuit at the base of the gantry, her space helmet resting in the crook of her arm. The photograph is in color, and

the blueness of her eyes is not one whit different in shade and texture from the blueness of the sky behind her. This is as it should be. Looking at her hair, one thinks of sunrises and sunsets. This is as it should be too. When remembering Rosemary, it is fitting that one should think of the sun and the sky. It is equally fitting that one should think of the snow and the rain. For Rosemary is nothing if she is not all of these things.

THE launching was a good one. The *Rainbow 6* rode its Saturn booster like a bird on jet-fire wings, and the bright star of its passage seemed to linger in the morning sky long after the booster had fallen away. The television cameras caught the action beautifully, and the American public, reminded once again that the noblest thing a person can do is to risk his life for his country, looked on in awe and admiration. The orbit was a good one too: apogee—203 miles; perigee—191 miles. Rosemary radioed back that she was A-okay.

She was supposed to complete three orbits, then climb into the escape capsule, jettison it and herself, re-enter the atmosphere, and parachute into the Atlantic. There, a task force waited eagerly to pick her up. Her mission was to orientate the satellite's

weather-factor instruments to the existent cloud patterns and jet streams. Once this was accomplished, the telemetric readings would, through the medium of the Main Weather Control Station in Oregon, dictate future weather. Weather control had been in effect since the middle sixties, but the telemetric readings of the unmanned weather-control satellites, owing to faulty orientation, had fallen far short of the one-hundred percent accuracy needed to make the regulation of rain and sunshine something more than a half-realized dream, and it was hoped that the present satellite, given a human boost, would bring the dream to fruition.

One can picture Rosemary high in the sky, faithfully carrying out her assignment. One can see her sitting there before the instrument panel of the *Rainbow 6* looking at dawns and sunsets and stars. One can see the slow drift of cloud and continent beneath her. Australia now, and now the vast blueness of the Pacific . . . and now the west coast rising out of mists of distances and air, and beyond it, the vast green blur of the land that gave her birth. Little Barbara Frietchie riding on a star . . . Far beneath her now, highways wind; rivers run down to seas. Patterning of field and forest blend into pale blue-

greens. Fresh-water lakes look up at her with blue and wondering eyes. Now the sea of night drifts forth to meet her. Bravely she sets sail upon the dark waves in her little silvery ship. Brief night, soft sunrise, new day.

I bring fresh showers for the thirsting flowers,

*From the seas and the streams;
I bear light shade for the leaves
when laid*

In their noonday dreams.

Little Barbara Frietchie riding on a star . . .

Jettisoning took place exactly on schedule. The weather-control satellite continued on its orbital way, and Rosemary plummeted earthward in the escape capsule. That much, at least, is known. But what took place during re-entry—whether the retro rockets failed to fire, whether the attitude controls malfunctioned, or whether the heat shield proved to be defective—is not known and never will be known. All that is known is that Rosemary became a falling star.

The nation mourned. The whole wide world mourned. Project Rain Dance was discontinued. It would have been discontinued in any event, for Rosemary had obviated any further need for it. She had done her job well, Rosemary had, and in the doing of it, she had placed the weather in the palm of mankind's outstretched hand.

THAT spring, the rains were soft and warm and the flowers grew riotously upon the face of the earth. Grass knew a greenness it had never known before, and trees dressed each day in lovelier and lovelier dresses. The rains fell in the cities and on the plains. In valleys and in little towns. On fields and forests and lawns. And when the land had drunk its fill, the sun came out as warm and as bright as Rosemary's hair, and the sky turned as blue as her eyes.

Yes, you know Rosemary, and you are in love with her in a way. If you are not, you should be. She is the sun coming up in the morning and the sun going down at night. She is the gentle rain against your face in spring. She is the snow falling on Christmas Eve. She is every glorious rainbow you see in the rain-washed sky. She is that pattern of tree-shade over there. Each morning, when you are lying fast asleep in your trundle bed, she tiptoes into your room, her golden sandals soundless on the bedroom floor, and wakes you with a golden kiss. Sunlight is her laughter, her voice the patter of the rain—Soft you now!—she speaks:

*I am the daughter of the earth
and water,*

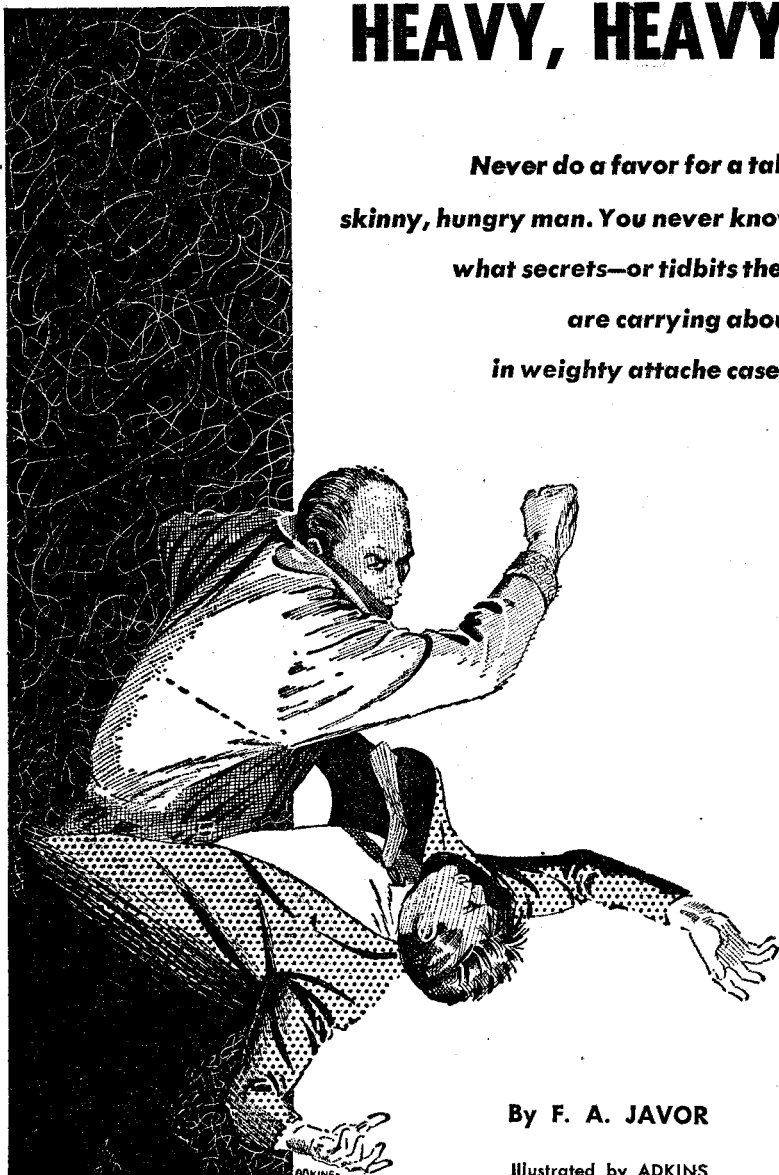
And the nursling of the sky;

*I pass through the pores of the
ocean and shores;*

I change, but I cannot die . . .

HEAVY, HEAVY

**Never do a favor for a tall,
skinny, hungry man. You never know
what secrets—or tidbits they
are carrying about
in weighty attache cases.**



By F. A. JAVOR

Illustrated by ADKINS

I'M six feet four, weigh a flabby two hundred and have a souvenir of the Second Peace Action on the top of my balding head in the shape of a scar that itches when it figures I'm about to be sucked into something that, if I'm lucky, I'll live to regret.

I wish I'd paid my scar more attention when, yesterday, Keely walked up to me, put his bony hand on the padded shoulder of my slightly out-of-date travel-tunic and, in that odd voice of his, invited me up to his cubicle for a friendly game to help us both while away the four days stopover time we had here on *Poldrogi* before the starship connection for Earthside made planetfall.

I shouldn't have needed my scar to tell me something smelled. After all, men who are as loaded as G. Warren Keely was reputed to be, just didn't walk up to an ex-SpaceNav Photo Mate and invite him anywhere, much less to an intimate gaming venture of theirs.

But now all I could do was to just sit here in the sound-conditioned quiet of Keely's room, clutching my hungry straight against the travel-worn front of my tunic and hope that Keely, across the table from me, would not see my eyeballs popping from the strain and know that I hadn't filled it.

But G. Warren Keely wasn't

looking at me. His eyes in that bony face of his seemed to be staring unseeingly at his cards and I could see the tip of his tongue flicking in and out between his thin lips. He looked tense enough to twang.

It didn't mean a thing. Keely's skinny body looked as tight-drawn as the E string on a cheap guitar no matter if he was holding all the aces or the well known doodle-y. And I had but two chips of my last pile left in front of me and a hard knot in the pit of my stomach to remind me of that. Small as this pot was, I had a lot more riding on it than just the chips and credit-discs I'd put into it.

I licked my lips and sat, feeling the cold sweat trickling down my sides under my shirt, waiting for Keely to make up his mind.

To my left, Hale, the dealer on this hand, a stocky man with the star-and-grapple device of my own branch of the Service, SpaceNav, glowing green and delicately shaded on the back of his hand as only the Chin-Worlds can tattoo, cleared his throat.

IN front of Keely a chip slipped from its balance on top of one of his piles and struck the table top with a tiny clatter. The sound seemed to make up his mind. I saw his eyes deep in their sockets measuring my last two chips like he was down to his last half mil-

lion and wondering where his next was coming from. And then he picked up two of his own chips and dropped them onto the small pile in the center of the table.

"I'll tap you," he said, his voice tight, sounding like that of a heavily burdened fat man and not at all like what you would expect to hear coming from a dried-up looking stilt-walker like him.

I knew Keely was talking to me because Hale, and Morgan, the player on my right, had dropped out before I'd drawn the one card I hoped would fill the empty belly of my straight and missed it.

But Hale, dealing, had shoved Keely's two chips back at him with his tattooed hand. "If you have a pat hand, say so," he snapped. "Else don't be so hungry for Pike's blood that you have to squeeze him before you draw."

But Hale didn't sound annoyed. Why should he be, with what had been my chips piled in front of him almost as high as in front of Keely after the way Keely's raising into him, after I'd committed myself to a pot had whipsawed me.

Keely smiled. A death's-head smile with his bleached teeth and tight-drawn skin. He put his cards, face down and fanned close in front of him, put the two chips on top of them and stood.

HEAVY, HEAVY

Inside, I groaned. Was he really all that superstitious, or was he throwing more mud in my eyes so that I'd think he was holding nothing?

Keely walked around his chair, lifting his half-boots carefully over the small, heavy-handed sample case he seemed to have picked up since our landing. He sat down, spat over his left shoulder. Then with a bony finger he pushed one card out of his fan, shoved the rest of them toward Hale.

"Four," he said, in his fat man's voice.

Hale and Morgan burst out laughing and I wished that I could have joined them. Keely had bet into me like a man with a powerhouse and now he was asking for what was practically a new hand.

But he had his cards now and again he threw in his two chips. "I tap you."

I took my last two chips in my hand and if it's true that a drowning man thinks fast enough to see his whole life flashing through his mind, then I might as well have been drowning.

Only I wasn't seeing my past, I was thinking of my future. My future. Keely had my cameras in hock, the cameras I'd hoped to open up the star-worlds with. Except that the star-worlds didn't much seem to care if a balding,

flabby ex-SpaceNav Photo Mate opened them up or not, so that I was already scraping before I even felt Keely's bony hand on my shoulder.

Now I was broke, even my Earthside passage-chit turned in to get the credits to sit in on this last game. If I lost, I'd be stranded on this transit-stop world called *Poldrogi* and my skin was crawling at the thought.

A transit-stop world is like any other place catering exclusively to people just passing through. There's lots of action and lots of credits flowing, but only between the natives and the transients. If you're a native, you've got your local big-wigs to look out for you. If you're a transient, you've got your money to do you the same service. But if you're just passing through and go broke? Well, who can blame the locals if they take it out on you for the slights, the insults, the downright brutalities they've put up with from transients who are perhaps less sensitive, but better brained than to get themselves stranded like me, Eli Pike.

I WEIGHED the two credits in my hand. Two credits. Flitterfare from here to the launchport . . . or one shot of Muscat. Two credits, my last.

I weighed them and looked at my cards. At the inside straight,

still empty in the middle and the eight I'd drawn. But it did match up with my outside card to give me a pair of them. A pair of eights against a four card draw.

I weighed my credits and looked at my cards and waited for my scalp wound to give me some kind of a hint. An itch, a tingle, anything, but I guess after all the ignoring I'd been giving it lately it was sulking.

Nothing.

I sighed and dropped my two credits into the pot.

Keely grinned and laid down his cards face up. "I helped my hand a little on that draw," he said.

He didn't have to tell me. I could see his cards. Five of them, and all blue. He'd drawn four cards to fill out a flush.

Hale said it for me. "I see it, but I don't believe it." He dropped the deck he was still holding and glanced at me, looking uncomfortable. After all, Keely hadn't been exactly subtle about the way he was reaming me. "This kind of luck who can fight?"

I shoved back my chair and stood up. "That cleans me," I said and the knot in my stomach couldn't be so hard after all. From the way it was shaking, it must be as soft as jelly. "See you around," I said and headed for Keely's door. All I wanted from his room right now was out.

"Pike! Wait!" It was Keely's voice and it stopped me.

I turned. Morgan was rubbing the back of his head and Hale was on his feet, stretching. The game was obviously over.

Keely waved me to a seat with one bony hand and when the others had gone, took the time to order up his lunch on the vid-com before he turned to me. And I mean took his time. I'd seen him study over the menu on the starship coming here, pulling out his lower lip, rubbing heads with the wine steward, even calling up the chef, so that I didn't fidget as much as I might otherwise have. The way Keely ate, his bones should have been lost in fat and not pushing hard through his skin.

I shook my head. If I ate like that, I'd waddle," I said and I was surprised to hear my voice come out unsteady. Maybe listening to Keely ordering all that food, and me not knowing where my next was coming from, had got me more unsettled than I already was.

Keely shrugged. "We each of us has his idiosyncrasy. Mine, I like to think, is at least endurable." Then he leaned back in his chair and kept looking at me out of those bony-socketed, beady eyes of his until I put my hands on the arms of my chair and started to push myself up.

Then he held up both his thin

hands. "Don't be so impatient," he said. "I think you'll find what I have to say to you well worth waiting to hear."

I hesitated, then dropped back again. If his purpose was to draw me out fine and snip off the knots he was making it.

HE lifted his half-booted foot and with it shoved the small sample case I'd been watching him step over each time he circled his chair for luck out into the clear. From the way it scraped the floor it was heavy. "I'd like you to do me a favor," he said.

I eyed the case. Black, shiny composition. About a foot high, and the same in the other two dimensions. Sturdy handle on top. It could pass for the case of one of my camera sync motors. But I'd bet no motor ever weighed what this box looked to.

"Like what?" I said, and I had all I could do to keep from reaching up and scratching the scar on the top of my head.

Keely was great on not answering questions. Instead he reached inside his tunic and came out with a short, compact-looking cylinder and stood it on the table right out in front of me.

Bright yellow the paper wrapping was, a roll of the new double-eagle credit-coins. Fifty of them in that roll and I didn't

need to see the black figures printed on the side to know that at twenty Earthbucks each I was staring at, what was, for me, salvation.

Keely let me drool a long minute before he waved a hand at the roll. "Go ahead," he said. "Pick it up. See what it feels like."

I reached out, did as he said. The skinny devil with his fat man's voice knew the roll would have a nice heft to it, that I might not be able to put it down.

But then Keely didn't know about my scar. I faked scratching it by rubbing it with the palm of my hand. I rubbed hard, but I had to give in.

I put the heavy roll of credits back on the table. "No, thanks," I said and heaved myself out of Keely's chair and headed for his door.

"Fifty credits . . .," his fat voice said, ". . . and your cameras."

It stopped me. The cameras I'd lost to Keely in yesterday's game, mine again . . . and enough credits to get me back Earthside and, if I watched it, a little left over.

So let my blasted scar itch. I turned back.

"You drive a hard bargain," I rasped. "Who do I kill?" and I wasn't really sure but that I wasn't half serious.

Keely laughed. "It's not that

hard to take," he said and kicked at his black sample case. "Take this Earthside with you when you go. Give it back to me when you get there."

I looked at him.

"That's it," he said.

"What's in the box?" I said.

"You've got a license to transport communications equipment," he said, not exactly answering me again. "Put it among your cameras and nobody will look at it twice."

KEELY was right about my having the license. Since the hard lesson of the last Peace Action, cameras, recorders, transmitters, anything larger than the personal limited range receivers most people carried had to be specially licensed. And the licenses were hard to get, almost impossible, it was rumored, without a service record of some sort to prove one's dependability.

Keely knowing about my license was no surprise, all photographers had them, it might even be the reason he'd sought me out to begin with. But he could be wrong about his case not being noticed among my equipment, and I didn't need an itching scar to warn me about carrying pigs in pokes.

"Is it communications equipment?" I said.

He hesitated, then nodded. "Yes, of a sort."

I didn't believe him. I started for the door again. Being stranded on a transit-world might get me knifed up some dark alley, but it was only a maybe. If I lost my license to carry my cameras over Keely's box, then *that* would be a sure thing. What else did I know how to do to earn me eating credits?

"Forget it," I said over my shoulder at Keely, half expecting him to try to stop me again.

But he didn't. If he had, maybe I would have kept on going and gotten out of there. But he just snorted in a disgusted way, like he was mad at himself for being soft-headed enough to try to do someone a favor. "Suit yourself," he said, and folded his long bony fingers over the non-existent paunch of his stomach.

Swearing at my scar, I turned back. I swept Keely's roll of credits into my tunic pocket, grabbed hold of his sample case to take it with me before I changed my mind again . . . and almost pulled my arm out of its socket.

The case did not budge.

With both hands I gripped the handle, squatting to lift with my legs so that its weight would not pop my back. It weighed. I wouldn't care to estimate what it weighed, but it weighed, and, leaning over backward against the pull, I carried it from Keely's room, him opening the door for

me and peering up and down the hall for some reason before he waved me on past him.

"You've got it now," he said and his voice wasn't tight, or fat-sounding. Just cold and the chill I felt I told myself came from the sweating his blasted case was making me do. "You've got it, don't lose it." And I heard him close and bolt his door behind me.

AFTER the brightness of Keely's room the hall was dim, and when I came to the cross-corridor with my eye-bulging burden and saw the two squat figures step out of it toward me, I took them at first to be Hale and Morgan, and half-wondered what they wanted.

But then I saw that the shorter of the two men had a kind of ape-like shuffle to the way he walked, and I knew then it was not the two men I'd been playing poker with the past two days.

There was no preamble. The taller man just stepped close to me. "Give me that," he snapped and reached for Keely's case.

Maybe I still had some of the chill of Keely's voice chasing itself up and down my spine, or maybe it was just a reflex action.

"Give me that," he said, and I did. As he and his ape-walking buddy reached their ham hands for the handle of Keely's case I swung it.

HEAVY, HEAVY

117

I swung it like an athlete swings his hammer, and Lord knows I've photographed enough of them to do it. But not that far. Just inches. Just far enough to give it a little arc when I let go the handle.

It arced. Like the proverbial ton of bricks it arced, and landed on the bigger ape's foot.

I heard the crunch of bones with a completely human feeling of satisfaction.

Big Ape yowled. He gripped his leg with both his hands and tried to heave his ruined foot out from under. He choked, gurgled and went down. He was out and a lucky thing for him it was. The human body can take just so much pain and then it cuts out. If his first yank hadn't knocked him out, the twisting of his trapped foot as he went down would have finished the job.

His ape-walking buddy goggled at the heap on the floor, then swung on me. "Why you . . .," lifting both arms, hands outstretched, edges down like two huge meat cleavers rising up on either side of my head.

I'm no karate or judo or any such kind of expert. All the body combat training I ever had was the demonstration or two in SpaceNav boot camp that they marched me to and marched me away from while they were making up their minds whether to assign me to Cook and Baker's

School or the Photo Lab on Pensa. As it turned out I went to neither. Someone slipped and I went to an operational photo unit right out of boot.

But how much science does it take to come up with a knee just as the other guy is closing in on you? Anyway, I did and I must have caught Ape-Walk where it hurts, because he turned green and grabbed himself. Which gave me the chance to come up under that craggy chin of his with my right hand in which, incidentally, I seemed to somehow be gripping the firm, hard roll of double-eagles I'd swept off Keely's desk and dropped into my tunic pocket.

Ape-Walk went down and I don't think it needed my boot at the side of his head to keep him there. But I was worked up and not thinking except maybe a fleeting thought about Heaven helping the expert in anything if he gets stupid enough to go up against a worked-up tyro.

I got even more worked up when I saw what was in Keely's box that I might have gotten myself killed over.

The heavy falling must have sprung its lock because as I stepped around Ape-Walk and squatted down to lift with my legs and not my back, the lid flew up with my first tug and I was staring down into its small inside.

Empty! Completely empty, except for two small fat coils wired together in the bottom that I recognized on sight even in the shaded hall light. I've used the gimmick often enough to anchor equipment under water or against a wind. Anti-gravity coils, jerry-rigged to reverse their polarity so that each one's field augmenting the other's made the case weigh like the backbreaker it did.

I reached down, ripped out the heavy jumper wire and the case was light in my hand as I stormed back to Keely's room.

"Keely," I shouted, pounding on his locked door, not much caring who heard the racket I was making. "Keely. Open up. It's Pike."

The door opened, suddenly, and I almost fell into the room.

I'D only been gone minutes, but it was long enough for Keely's food to have been brought up to him. At least I thought it was because he stood away from the door with a small kebab skewer in his fingers; on the end of it a tiny, brown, peanut-shaped carcass, and I didn't need the faintly sickening sweet smell nor the burning candle-warmer on the table behind him, to know Keely was roasting for himself the contraband grubs of the Ra-Pak beetle.

And from the glaze in Keely's

eyes I think I would have won a bet that he hadn't removed their venom sacs.

Ra-Pak grub venom. The fat, stinking grubs, roasted, were disgusting enough, but gourmets have been known to work up a fancy for eating many an oddball thing, earth and clay in ancient Spain, for example. But the venom. That had an absinthe-like effect on the brain and moral fibre that made it an outlawed thing on any world that was not altogether depraved. Even here on *Poldrogi* I could think of no one who would touch the traffic in the worms.

That meant that Keely must have brought his supply with him, and if he could get Ra-Pak grubs through customs, then what did he need me for to move an empty box?

I shoved the sample case up to his face with one hand, reached for his tunic front with the other. "Two apes," I started to say, but he'd stepped back and, if there had been any blood in his face to drain away, I think it would have done so when he saw me and the open case.

His mouth worked soundlessly and then he was able to get out the words. "Already? They caught up with you already?"

And then the glaze cleared from his eyes and he was his tight-drawn, snide self again. "Throw that thing away," he

said, making a motion at the box I was holding under his thin nose. "I guess they're closer to me than I thought."

I dropped the case. Not on his foot, but on the floor. "They," I said. "Who're they? What did you suck me into? I've got a right to know."

Keely shrugged. "Rights," he said. "I made a play and I missed. You're fifty double-eagles ahead because of it. Keep them and forget it. Good bye."

But those two apes out in the hall would come looking for me when they came to and I knew exactly nothing about what was going on. "Listen," I said to Keely. "I'm not going until . . ."

"Move," Keely snapped, and suddenly pointing at me was the kebab skewer I'd surprised in his hand, the wormlike Ra-Pak grub still impaled on its point.

An eight inch skewer of steel, held daintily with a delicacy, no matter how repulsive, on its point is one thing. But settled firm in the hand and pointing at your throat, it suddenly becomes a very convincing stiletto.

"Move," Keely said. "I won't tell you again."

I moved. Out. And again the door was closed and bolted behind me.

I DID not go to see if the apes were still piled up on the hall floor, but went in the other direc-

tion instead. As far as the first cross-corridor.

I ducked into it, pulled my room key from my pocket, hung it by its ring on my finger in plain sight. If I heard someone coming I could start walking and obviously be a guest looking for his room. Meanwhile, I could stay where I was and keep an eye and an ear on Keely's room.

Sooner or later he would have to come out and if he didn't look to be staggering under any weight, then what I had to look for was still inside. Because it was beginning to dawn on me that Keely had selected me to carry his black box Earthside, not because he couldn't do it himself, secretly, but because my two hundred pounds of staggering flab couldn't be missed doing the same.

A decoy I'd been. A patsy. And now I was in it with Keely on one side of me and the apes or whoever it was wanted something weighty from Keely, on the other. And now that I'd tangled with both sides, I stood a good chance of getting clobbered by either or both. Still ignorant of what it was all about, but clobbered just the same.

The answer was in Keely's room, but first I had to get in.

His lunch came, but from the other direction so that I didn't need to use my "riving guest" dodge. The waiter rolled in his

cart and left it. I was too far away to hear Keely shoot home the bolt of his door behind him, but I was sure he had.

Having seen the almost obscene pleasure Keely took with his food, I expected a long wait, and he didn't disappoint me. My neck and my shoulders were stiff with all the waiting and I was leaning them on the wall and shifting, and beginning to think that I had Keely figured wrong, that he was inside getting himself way out on grub venom and I could be here the rest of the day and all of the night, when he finally came out and went down the hall to the downflit, his skinny legs moving like scissors.

Now, unbolted on the inside, his door could be unlocked from the hall side by anyone who had a master to this tier. And that meant the waiter who'd be coming back for his food cart.

I got myself ready for him by breaking open the roll of double-eagles and distributing them loose in my tunic pockets. When he opened the door and went in I was right on his heels, my hand in my side pocket.

"Keely?" I said to the room. "Keely? It's Pike. Where are you?"

The waiter turned on me, his eyes hostile. And then I saw the light come into them and knew he was hearing me jingling the double-eagles in my pocket with

what I hoped would be taken for impatience. "Where is that guy," I added for effect.

The waiter was very polite. "I'm afraid Mr. Keely isn't here," he said. "I think I passed him in the hall a few minutes ago."

You didn't pass him anywhere, friend, I said to myself, he was long gone before you showed up. But I dropped into Keely's chair behind his card table and looked at my wrist-chrono. "Then he'd better be getting back soon," I said. "I don't plan on waiting long."

THE waiter started to say something, protest maybe about my staying alone in Keely's room, but I stopped him.

I stopped him by starting to take double-eagles from my various pockets where I'd stowed them and stacking them on the table in front of me.

I looked up at him. "Well," I said, "what are you waiting for?" I waved a hand at his cart and the empty dishes. "Clean up this mess and get out of here."

I held my breath and went on pulling credits from my pockets and stacking them and hoping that with all that hard loot piling up in front of me I would not only look respectable to the waiter, but also as if I had a right to be where I was.

I did. Because he mumbled "Yessir," scooped up his dishes

and was gone. I didn't tip him because A, double-eagles was all I had and to flip him one of those for just letting me wait in Keely's room was too much and would make him suspect me to be a phony, and B, or maybe A again, a double-eagle was, after all, a double-eagle.

The waiter had no sooner closed the door behind him than I was on my feet and rummaging in Keely's closet.

I didn't know what it was that I was looking for, but I was sure it would be small enough to fit into a one-foot-by-one-foot box and heavy. Too heavy for the bottom of a hotel-dresser drawer to support, and for the same reason not likely to be lifted onto a high closet shelf.

On the closet floor I looked, and on the closet floor I found it. A sturdy, metal-bound tache case, the only one of the bags stowed there with enough heft to it. I dragged it out of the closet darkness and into the light.

It was locked. I'd expected it to be. The locks, two, set deep in the plasti-leather. No prying them open.

Cut the case.

I looked around for something sharp, a skewer perhaps, but there were none in the drawers I hastily pulled out.

A skewer! Food! With Keely's rates and his appetites, his room had a wine cooler and when I

opened it I saw I was in luck. A tall bottle cooling.

I smashed it and took the broken neck to the side of the tache case. It cut, but only through the plasti-leather. Underneath it, the hardness of metal.

I sat back on my heels, puffing with my flab and my exertions, having it in mind to risk the reception committee maybe waiting for me in my room and to haul case and all there for a better go at the locks when I heard a fumbling at the door.

Escape!

I shoved the case across the floor to the window, flung open the sash, hefted the weight up onto the sill, lifted one leg over the edge after it.

Thirty-seven dizzy levels below was the nearest terrace and I balanced there, half in, half out, gripping the case teetering on the sill in my sweaty palms.

The door burst open and Keely shot into the room. He tried to slam it shut, but the two men were too close behind him, thrusting him back as they smashed in.

Ape-Walk and a tall, blonde man with a blaster. "Freeze," the blonde one said, and Keely froze.

I couldn't believe it, but was Keely sobbing quietly? And then I saw that his eyes were on the case teetering in my hands. Sweaty hands that were having trouble gripping it because it

kept trying to slip out of them. Staring and saying over and over, "No. Oh, no."

The blonde one with the blaster motioned at me with it. "Inside," he said, but I shook my head. "You want this case," I said. "I come in and you take it and blast me. I stay here maybe you blast me anyway, but the case goes down with me if you do."

There was a long silence between us and then the blonde one laughed. "Mexican standoff. What do you want? A cut?"

"No, an explanation."

The pale eyes wavered. "An explanation?"

"Sure," I said and I was sweating. "Keely here set me up for some kind of patsy. All I want is to know what he sucked me into."

The two men were looking at me and not at Keely. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a glint of light and the broken bottle neck I'd dropped by the closet door was somehow hurtling through the air and full at the tall man with the blaster.

In that instant I knew about Keely. About him and about a chip that fell of itself off the top of a pile, a skewer that settled itself in his hand, even about the tache case that seemed to want to free itself of my grasp on it. Keely could move things with his mind!

The hurtling bottle neck!

Without thinking, I yelled and the tall man dropped. The jagged glass missile missing his face and eyes by the scantest of margins, to go smashing against the wall.

Thinking or not, it turned out to be the smarest thing I'd done since I first saw Keely. But just now he looked to be flinging himself at me, bony arms outstretched, hands clawing.

I shoved myself into the room, pushing one way, the case flying the other. But Keely was past me and I thought out the window after the case.

He hung there straining. Straining until I heard the smashing sound from the terrace far below. Then he fell back into the room, sliding down until he sat on the floor under the window and this time there was no mistaking the fact that the sounds coming from behind the hands covering his face were sobs.

The tall man was picking himself up from the floor, his face white. "I owe you for that," he said, and put away his blaster.

He looked at Keely sobbing on the floor and spat. "The pig," he said. "Serves him right. He did it to himself."

LATER, back in my room, I was still shaking my head over what the blonde man had

HEAVY, HEAVY

123

told me of Keely and his strange talent . . . and the even stranger use to which, driven by his compulsion to eat, yet smothering in inexorably swelling fat, Keely had put it.

Imperfectly, because his control was erratic, incomplete, taking along bits of nerve and other tissue, and cutting down their bulk but not their weight by squeezing from them some of the space between their atoms, Keely had teleported to refri-jars he could carry in his double-locked case, the fat-bloated cells of his body.

And because a man does not grow obese by adding more cells to his body but by distending, with the by-products of his gluttony, those he already has, Keely could not bring himself to abandon these cells. And in the learning of this fact of Keely's mind, was born the blonde man's plan.

EDITORIAL

(Continued from page 5)

It is a measure of our times that the present-day science-illiterate author cannot possibly comprehend the myriad of technical wonders still to come. He cannot understand—nor extrapolate into future terms—that each new invention and discovery automatically opens the door to a host of new ideas that proliferate countless others.

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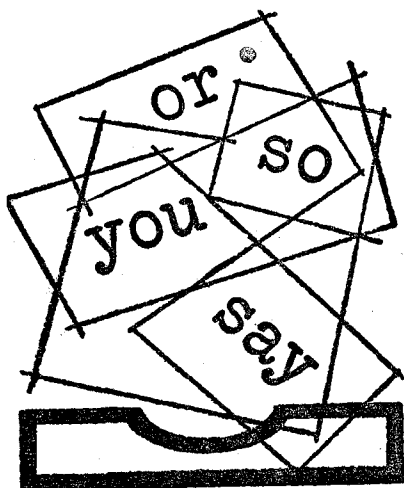
What better to hold for a rich man's ransom than bits of his own body? And if caught? All they'd taken were a few refri-jars of oddly heavy human fat. A laboratory curiosity, but of no intrinsic value.

A direct and imaginative plan except, of course, it hadn't worked out. I shook my head. Well, the kidnappers, if you could call them that, were gone and so was Keely, spirited out the back way by the jittery hotel people, strapped in a psycho-cocoon and still sobbing.

I rubbed my hand over my balding head. I had no cameras and no illusions about getting them from Keely when he got out of the psycho-home, if he ever did. But my scar didn't itch and, when I moved, the double-eagles sagging my tunic pockets made a light but thoroughly comforting jingle.

THE END

of before. If these are often termed derisively "gadget stories" by the technologically illiterate, the more power to those far-seeing authors who have the imagination and the intellectual gifts to read the future aright so they can point out to their more modest and less fortunate brethren the direction in which the world is heading. Given enough such outstanding authors, true prophetic science fiction could very well stage the massive comeback so badly needed in our present idea-impooverished world."



Dear Miss Goldsmith:

I have just finished reading Edgar Rice Burroughs' "Savage Pellucidar" in your November issue, and enjoyed it very thoroughly. I hope you will continue to publish these newly obtained manuscripts of one of the greatest science-fiction authors of his time. I have run into several people (not sf fans) who, acquainted with his "Tarzan of the Apes" only through comics and movies, declare his writing to be childish and shallow. It is true that all his novels use the same pattern of excitement, but I am sure that all sf fans familiar with his works are grateful to him for many hours of enjoyable reading.

You mentioned in your editorial in that same issue that you had published three of his previ-

ous Pellucidar stories. I would appreciate it if you could either send me reprints of these stories, or tell me how I could obtain copies of them.

Thomas M. Hopkins
2201 Truman St.

Bryan, Texas

• "The Return To Pellucidar", "Men of the Bronze Age" and "Tiger Girl" appeared in February, March and April 1942 AMAZING. Reprints of the stories alone are not available, however copies of these issues may possibly be obtained from Ziff-Davis Service Division, Dept BCA, 589 Broadway, New York 12, N.Y. Enclose 65¢ for each issue. Or you can get all four stories in one hardcover book titled "Savage Pellucidar," published by Canaveral Press, Inc. at \$3.50 per copy. This is available at your bookstore or Biblo & Tannen Booksellers & Publishers, Inc. 63 Fourth Avenue, New York 3.

Dear Editors:

On reading the letter column in your November issue, and impelled by the letters of Messrs. Rensch and Stricklen, I checked through the letter columns of all my AMAZINGS, and made a list of the topics I have been meaning to write about but never got around to.

Zelazny has been one of your best writers; though he is stark, and sometimes rude-impolite, he

has never (to my knowledge) contributed a poorly written story to either AMAZING or FANTASTIC. Harrison Denmark is not disgusting or nauseating, and Bunch is often merely boring (not always—sometimes he surpasses himself).

As for Mr. Yacuk, and those pro and con his views, might I suggest that they look up a few recent sf novels (relatively speaking): Alfred Bester's *The Stars My Destination*, Brown's *The Lights in the Sky are Stars*, Clarke's *The City and the Stars*, Henry Kuttner's *Destination: Infinity*, even Heinlein's *Stranger* (which, although it confuses things considerably means something both in mythic and conceptual symbols, if you can sort it out). From these and many other novels, and especially from the genuine mythic heroes, and an elementary text on anthropology and/or comparative religions, these poor people might learn that the reason so much ERB, Kline, and other "epic" writers falls flat on its face is because it attempts to put essentially religious or 'sacred' characters in jejune, humdrum, and non-religious (profane) situations; since the two aspects of human reality are almost totally unrelated (and almost can't be related, meaningfully,) it is no surprise that you get nothing but dull bedtime stories.

Mr. Yacuk in the August issue misses the idea of regeneration which comes free with *A Trace of Memory* (I think). I doubt if Laumer would ever make a change in character like that through accident.

"Drunkboat" was one of the best stories in your October issue; Katheryn Avila missed one of the points in "The Yes Men of Venus"—Burroughs ended a number of his books with that same sort of trick ending.

R. Brzustowicz Jr.
366 Oakdale Dr.

Rochester, N.Y. 14618

● *The sacred and profane aspects of what you call reality are far from unrelated. On the contrary, anti thesis are always related.*

Dear Miss Goldsmith:

I greatly admire the *SF Profile* series by Sam Moskowitz, but with the current October, 1963 issue, SaM's article on Edmond Hamilton appears to have been written in great haste. There is a flaw that stands out like a third arm on page 109. SaM writes: "WEIRD TALES never rejected an Edmond Hamilton story for any reason." I ask you to read page 108, where SaM has written: "WEIRD TALES editor Farnsworth Wright rejected it (*Beyond the Unseen Wall*) because of an unclear ending." Although SaM's

(Continued on page 128)



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(Continued from page 126)

next statement is that it was later rewritten and appeared in that magazine under the title of *The Monster-God of Mamurth*, this certainly does not change anything.

Drunkboat was quite an enjoyable novelet, which seemed to have been written by a brimming poet. More than once I have read that "Cordwainer Smith" is a *nom de plume*; and it is my guess that Smith is Theodore Sturgeon. One reason for this is that Smith's writings are as crisp and sharp and alive as anything Sturgeon has ever written, and their methods seem to flow together in a common stream.

Bill Wolfenbarger

• "Smith" is a *nom de plume*, all right, but not for Sturgeon.

Dear Cele:

Convention Annual No. 3 pictures and text (Dis-con Edition) covering this year's worldcon in Washington, D. C. is being prepared now and a special prepublication price of \$2.00 is available to Dec. 31, 1963, with regular price of \$2.50 after that date.

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